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700 doctors call time on 24-week abortion limit

Premature babies' survival rates prompt open letter to MPs asking them to back major amendment

Andy Drozdzia

Pro-lifers have joined over 700 medical professionals in urging MPs to introduce the most significant change in abortion law in a generation, by reducing the abortion limit to 22 weeks.

In a letter to all 650 MPs, the medical professionals urge them to vote in support of an amendment tabled by a cross-party group of over 30 MPs, led by Caroline Ansell MP, to lower the abortion time limit from 24 to 22 weeks, backed by credible advances in medical science.

Catholic medic Dermot Kearney believes the amendment comes at a "very important moment" because technological advances mean that babies born at 22 or 23 weeks are able to survive.

"The proposal by Caroline Ansell MP that the abortion limit be dropped from 24 weeks to 22 weeks comes at a very important moment," Dermot Kearney told the *Universe*.

"It reflects the significant improvements in medical technology that have occurred in recent years, whereby many premature babies born at 22 and 23 weeks gestation can survive with appropriate neonatal intensive care support.

"Survival at that early stage would have been almost unthinkable when the original Abortion Act of 1967 was devised. The age of viability then was considered to be 28 weeks."

Caroline Ansell backed this point this week, pointing to improved survival rates for extremely premature babies who are increasingly capable of survival outside of the

womb. She wrote in the *Telegraph*: "In the decade to 2019 alone, the survival rate in the UK for extremely premature babies born at 23 weeks doubled, prompting new guidance from the British Association of Perinatal Medicine (BAPM) that enables doctors to intervene to save premature babies from 22 weeks gestation".

The amendment is supported by former health minister Maggie Throup, ex-shadow cabinet Labour minister Rachael Maskell, ex-shadow Labour minister Marie Rimmer, ex-home office minister Sir John Hayes, ex-Cabinet Minister Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg and Miriam Cates MP.

Dermot Kearney is encouraged by the significant support for the amendment, believing that it reflects the mindset of the "vast majority" of UK doctors.

"It is encouraging that 700 doctors have signed a letter in support of this proposal. Those 700 signatures were collected in a matter of days," he said.

"There is no doubt that the vast majority of doctors in the UK would similarly support the proposal to lower the abortion limit in keeping with advances in medicine. It is vital that the proposal is widely supported both in recognition of the wonderful advances in neonatal care and in order to halt the proposal for the complete decriminalisation of abortion."

Caroline Ansell says reducing the UK abortion time limit would bring it more into line with its European counterparts. "The average abortion time limit among EU countries is 12 weeks, the end of the first trimester of pregnancy. Germany, Ireland and Italy are among countries that have a 12-week limit; in France and Spain, the limit is 14 weeks and even liberal Sweden's limit of 18 weeks falls less than halfway through the second trimester of pregnancy", she said.

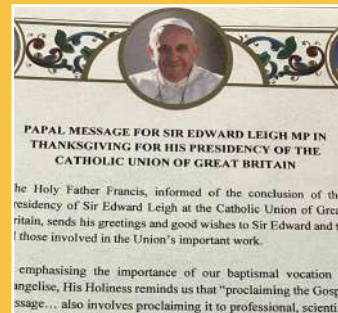
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NICE TO MEET YOU, MAESTRO



Find out what Hollywood mega star Bradley Cooper had to say when he met Catholic schoolboy singing sensation Malakai Bayoh, on page 5

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More time in desert as Dune returns

COMPANION



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Christian convert asylum seekers 'failed to show up at church'

A former Church of England priest has said that there is a pattern of asylum seekers seeking baptism who drift away when invited to become part of the church community.

Rev. Matthew Firth made his comments while testifying before a Home Affairs Select Committee on 12th March.

Reverend Canon Christopher Thomas, general secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, also appeared at the hearing with The Right Reverend Guli Francis-Dehqani, the Bishop of Chelmsford, and Reverend Steve Tinning of the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Firth, who was based in Darlington between 2018-2020, encountered "significant numbers" of asylum seekers coming forward for baptism.

"It was a large number of young male asylum seekers," he said. "At a time six or seven people [were] brought to me by people saying these people need baptism. You try to press a pause button which is to make sure that people are requested to come to church, start getting involved and attending regularly.



Rev Canon Christopher Thomas

"They were not really wanting to get involved in the life of the church so much after I requested them to do so".

The hearing came after recent notable cases, such as Newcastle-based Abdul Ezedi, who successfully challenged his asylum refusal after converting to Christianity and then attacked a woman in London.

At the time, a spokesman for the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle confirmed that Ezedi "visited our di-

ocesan Justice and Peace Refugee Project, a charitable venture which assists a wide range of people who come to us in need". However, it denied any involvement in Ezedi's faith journey.

During the hearing, Rev Canon Christopher Thomas, general secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, was asked if converts go on to take part in the life of the Church.

"It would be incumbent on every priest to have an interview, a formal interview in many respects, with the person who is seeking baptism," he said.

"In that process you would unpack their position, of where they've come from, if they were asylum seekers, for instance."

"To say everyone who receives baptism as an adult and then continues on in the church, you can't say whether that will happen... we are all human and people will have difference experiences of faith."

Rev Canon Thomas was also asked if clergy have access to guidance on baptism for asylum seekers, to which he replied: "No, there is not."

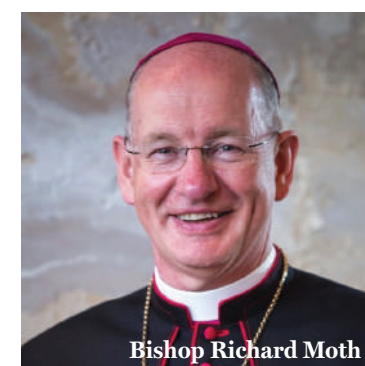
Bishop backs carer amendment

Bishop Richard Moth, the Lead Bishop for Prisons for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and Bishop Rachel Treweek, Anglican Bishop for Prisons, have backed Amendment 172 to the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

The amendment requires the central collection and publication of data that shows the number of primary carers in the prison system, how many children they are responsible for, as well as the ages of those children.

The bishops said this will help society understand the "devastating consequences" that the imprisonment of a primary caregiver can have on a child.

They said: "Given the absence of any systematic recording and reporting of the number of children affected by imprisonment and the compelling evidence that the imprisonment of a primary carer can have devastating consequences for



Bishop Richard Moth

the development of a child, we believe that such an amendment is both necessary and proportionate."

The amendment, tabled by Lord Farmer with support from Bishop Treweek and Labour Peers Lord Ponsonby and Baroness Thornton, will help address the experience of the over 17,500 children estimated to be separated from their mothers in prison, as well as those without other primary caregivers.

Bishop Moth and Bishop Treweek

said: "Substantial research has revealed that children affected by the imprisonment of a primary carer are hidden victims of the criminal justice process, especially where their mother is sent to prison.

"A mother's imprisonment is often a profoundly disruptive and traumatic experience affecting all aspects of a child's life, regardless of the age of the child or the length of the sentence, while the rupturing of relationship between a prisoner with primary caring responsibilities and those in their care can itself be a significant stumbling block to rehabilitation."

They added: "When we consider that 31 per cent of our female prisoners, and 24 per cent of our male prisoners, were themselves taken into care as children, we can see that caring for children, especially those affected by imprisonment, is critical for the flourishing of all within our communities."

Doctors call time on 24-week abortion limit

Continued from page 1

Spokesperson for Right To Life UK, Catherine Robinson, shared her support for the amendment.

"At the moment, a baby at 22 or 23 weeks gestation could be born

prematurely and have a dedicated medical team provide expert care to try to save his or her life, while another baby at the same age could have their life deliberately ended by abortion in the same hospital at the

same time," she said

"This is a contradiction in UK law. This contradiction must end, and Ansell's amendment, which now has the support of 33 MPs, is seeking to solve this"

Pro-life campaigner faces trial over offer to support women in crisis

A retired Catholic medical scientist from Bournemouth is facing trial in relation to her charitable work supporting women in crisis pregnancies.

Livia Tossici-Bolt, 62, held a sign reading “here to talk, if you want to” while stood quietly near an abortion facility in Bournemouth. While she held the sign, several individuals approached her to discuss issues they were facing in their lives.

Local authorities confronted Tossici-Bolt, alleging that she had breached a local abortion ‘buffer zone’ which bans expression of approval or disapproval of abortion. They issued a Fixed Penalty Notice, which Tossici-Bolt refused to pay, on the grounds that she did not breach the terms of the PSPO, and had the right, protected under Article 10 of the Human Rights Act, to offer consensual conversations.

The Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council have proceeded to charge her, and Livia now awaits a trial at Poole Magistrates’ Court.

Sher told the *Universe*: “We all condemn harassment. But buffer zones criminalise activities which are peaceful and helpful.

“There’s nothing wrong with offering help. There’s nothing wrong with two adults engaging in a consensual conversation on the street. I shouldn’t be treated like a criminal just for this.”

In 2023 a Public Order Act was passed in the UK to enforce censorial buffer zones around all abortion facilities, banning any form of ‘influence’.

The Home Office has issued draft guidance to clarify that the right of women to engage in consensual conversations of their own free will remains protected, as does the freedom to pray inside one’s own mind. But two MPs have approached the Home Office demanding that the guidance be changed to cease protecting both of these rights.

Jeremiah Igunnubole, legal counsel for ADF UK, which is supporting Livia’s defence, said: “Under vaguely-written local buffer zone measures, we have seen volunteers like Livia criminalised simply for offering help to women in need; and others dragged through courts for praying, even silently.

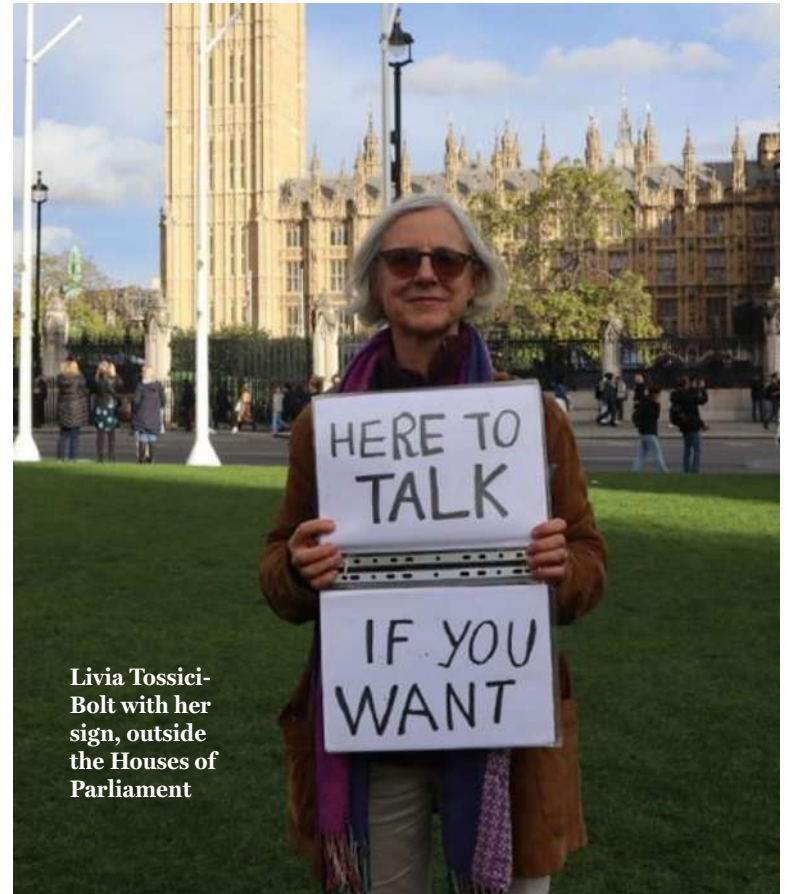
“The principle of freedom of

thought and speech must be defended.”

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council apologised for causing Livia Tossici-Bolt to feel “distressed and harassed” when officers wrongfully attempted to move her from a public street on another occasion. Tossici-Bolt was standing alone and holding a sign reading ‘Pregnant? Need help?’ with a helpline number for women in crisis pregnancies.

In a moment captured on video, officers confronted Tossici-Bolt, accusing her of standing inside Bournemouth’s censorial buffer zone. However, they have since acknowledged that she was not within the censored buffer zone on this occasion.

Mr Igunnubole said: “Livia was interrogated for praying and offering charitable help even outside of a buffer zone, exposing the reality of the slippery slope of censorship. If the state is allowed to criminalise the mere holding of prolife viewpoints within certain public spaces, on what basis can we object to criminalisation in all public spaces?”



Livia Tossici-Bolt with her sign, outside the Houses of Parliament

Scotland told buffer zones bill will be a threat to free speech

Andy Drozdziak

A Catholic pro-life campaigner has urged the Scottish parliament to promote tolerance over censorship as the row over buffer zones continues.

The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill, proposed by Green MSP Gillian MacKay, would criminalise any action aimed at persuading someone not to access abortion or to consider an alternative, within 200 metres of premises carrying out abortions.

It would also be illegal to act in a way designed to influence decisions, hand out leaflets, hold up banners or placards or pray – either audibly or silently – with unlimited fines for serious breaches.

Throughout 2023, Birmingham police arrested Catholic campaigner Isabel Vaughan-Spruce on multiple occasions for praying silently outside an abortion clinic before issuing an apology for doing so.

Addressing parliamentarians on the Health, Social Care and Sport committee, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce said: “After having to clear my name in court I was rearrested two weeks later being told ‘my prayers were an offence’. I’m concerned that this will end up happening in Scotland. No-

body should be punished for a ‘thoughtcrime’ – yet this proposed legislation could easily allow that to happen.

“The Scottish Government must protect freedom of thought and of speech, and promote tolerance rather than censorship.”

Gillian MacKay’s proposal for “safe access zones” around all abortion clinics in Scotland has received criticism from free speech advocates. Lois McLatchie Miller, a spokesperson for campaign group Alliance for the Defence of Freedom (ADF UK) in Scotland, said: “Scotland’s buffer zone bill is one of the most extensive crackdowns on pro-life thought and speech we’ve seen.

“As drafted, it could even ban prayer and peaceful pro-life speech within homes if they are situated sufficiently near an abortion facility.

“The proposal would also allow the 150m distance of the buffer zone to be expanded by local authorities to an unlimited extent.”

She added a call for the Scottish parliament to “uphold their duty to protect freedom of thought, offers of help, and consensual conversation.”

3rd May will be the deadline for the Bill’s initial vote.

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In Brief

Teachers face legal challenge over wrong pronouns

Teachers who refuse to use pupils' preferred pronouns could face legal challenges despite new transgender guidance, unions have claimed.

Education unions have told the Government that its draft guidance for schools is flawed because it would leave teachers and schools open to "vitriolic and threatening challenges".

Trans-guidance for schools was published for consultation in December, in response to an increase in the number of children questioning their gender. The consultation closes next Tuesday.

Ashes horror for grieving wife

A widow who had her late husband's ashes made into jewellery has been told his real body has been located in storage at a funeral home.

Police told the woman that his body had been found in a freezer at Legacy International Funeral Directors in Hull after raiding the premises following reports of "concern for the care of the deceased".

Police that they had recovered 35 bodies from the premises, with formal identification yet to take place.

No comeback for Boris, say allies

Boris Johnson has barely spoken to Rishi Sunak in the past year, according to the former PM's allies, as they poured cold water on an election comeback.

The Telegraph suggested that Sunak wanted Johnson to play a key role in the campaign, despite tensions between the two men.

But attempts to patch up their relationship failed.

Irish voters reject Government plans for mums and the family

Michael Kelly

The Irish Taoiseach has conceded that his Government was defeated "comprehensively" after voters rejected amendments to the constitution that the country's bishops warned would have weakened support for marriage and undermined motherhood.

Despite opinion polls showing a clear majority in favour of a Government plan to widen the definition of the family to include other 'durable relationships' as well as marriage, when votes were counted on 9th March, 67.7% of citizens rejected the amendment, while 32.3% supported it.

A second amendment proposed removing a provision from the 1937 document that said women should not be forced by economic necessity to take a job 'to the neglect of their duties in the home.'

This proposal was rejected by an even wider margin, 73.9% to 26.1% – the highest-ever 'no' vote in Irish referendum history.

The amendments had been supported by all political parties except the small Aontú party, which only has one member in the national parliament, known as the Oireachtas.

Speaking in Dublin Castle on 9th March, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said he was disappointed by the results. However, he stated, "The public comprehensively took the view they did not want to make changes to the constitution that we proposed. We accept that, we respect that and we take responsibilities for the results."

The referendums were held on 8th March, designed to coincide with International Women's Day, and the results were announced on 9th March, a day before Mother's Day.

David Quinn, director of the pro-marriage think-tank the Iona



People from the Equality Not Care group, which campaigned for a no vote, celebrate the victory in Dublin

Institute, called the rejection of both proposals "the best possible present ahead of Mother's Day."

He said: "The Government asked voters to remove the word 'mother' from the constitution and they answered with a resounding 'no.' They also rejected by a huge margin the attempt to foist the extremely nebulous term 'durable relationships' on the constitution."

"This was a great victory for common sense ... and a damning indictment of how politics has become inaccessible for so many. Our politicians are woefully out of touch with the public."

lous term 'durable relationships' on the constitution."

Maria Steen, a Catholic lawyer who campaigned against both proposals, described the result as "a great victory for common sense."

Brandon Scott, a representative for the only political party to oppose the proposals, Aontú, said the lack of political opposition to the referendum in light of the public rejection is "a damning indictment of how politics has become inaccessible for so many."

"Our politicians are woefully out of touch with the public."

The Government spent £17 million running the referendum. Ahead of the poll, in a pastoral letter, the country's Catholic bishops had warned that the amendments could weaken the incentive for young people to get married.

In a statement read at Masses the weekend before the vote, the bishops said the family is the foundational cell of society and is essential to the common good because it is based on "the exclusive, lifelong and life-giving public commitment of marriage."

The prelates had warned that the second amendment would have had "the effect of abolishing all reference to motherhood in the Constitution" and left "the particular and incalculable societal contribution" that mothers in the home have made, and continue to make, in Ireland unacknowledged.

Adopted in 1937, Ireland's Constitution has been subject to referendum on proposed amendments 40 times, 20 of those proposed amendments in its first 63 years, and 20 more since 2000.

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Move over Maestro, Malakai is in town

Andy Drozdziak

A *Britain's Got Talent* singing sensation from a London Catholic school has spoken of his happiness at singing in front of Hollywood movie stars Bradley Cooper and Cary Mulligan.

Last year, Malakai Bayoh, 14, from Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, London, amazed Simon Cowell on the top talent show, and was told by the *Britain's Got Talent* judges that he has a "gift from God".

He was voted through to the final after outstanding performances of *O Mio Babbino Caro* and *Pie Jesu*, eventually finishing fourth.

He returned from singing in the world-famous Lincoln Centre in Manhattan, New York, last month where he performed before a star-studded audience, which included Hollywood stars Bradley Cooper and Cary Mulligan.

"I am very proud to have sung in the Lincoln Centre in America," Malakai said. "It was my first time in New York, and it was a new experience, to sing before Bradley Cooper and Cary Mulligan and also happy to win their appreciation."

"They said that they were 'very happy' to have me there."

Malakai was invited to sing in the Lincoln Centre for a live performance of the soundtrack from the film *Maestro*, in which Bradley Cooper and Cary Mulligan play the lead roles. Malakai has sung two songs for the film.

Malakai has been singing since the age of 7, starting after his "very bossy" mother made him join a choir.

He has been singing ever since, and is now a consort in the St. George's Cathedral choir, a role he



has performed for nearly seven years.

He still looks back in astonishment at his success on *Britain's Got Talent*. "I was really shocked when I got the fourth place," he said.

"It was all surreal. My friends and my family were all excited and proud about my performance. I felt a bit nervous, standing on the stage and singing before those judges. But I was not disappointed by how I performed."

Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School congratulated Malakai on his trip to New York and on his journey to last year's final, calling him "an inspiration to young singers across the world" and "a true talent."

Malakai has paid tribute to Cardinal Vaughan music teacher Scott Price, who encouraged him to take part in *Britain's Got Talent*. "He is my motivator," Malakai said.

• Look out for Suresh Abboodass' full, exclusive interview with Malakai in next week's Universe.

Malakai is pictured left with Bradley Cooper, and right at the show in New York



Photos: Courtesy of Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School

Papal message cheers Sir Edward as he steps down from CU

Andy Drozdziak

The former President of the Catholic Union has received a Papal Message to mark his departure from the role.

Sir Edward Leigh MP recently stepped down as president after 10 years of service. During a reception in the House of Lords on 6th March, attended by Cardinal Nichols and Lord David Alton, a Papal Message was conveyed to Sir Edward by the Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain, Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendía.

"The Holy Father Francis, informed of the conclusion of the Presidency of Sir Edward Leigh at the Catholic Union of Great Britain, sends his greetings and good wishes to Sir Edward and to all those involved in the Union's important work," Archbishop Buendía said.

"The Holy Father cordially im-

parts his Apostolic Blessing to Sir Edward Leigh and to all members of the Catholic Union of Great Britain and, through the intercession of the Mother of God, invokes an abundance of Divine graces."

The Catholic Union conveyed its own thanks to Sir Edward in a social media message. Highlighting his "faith and fortitude", the Union wrote: "Last night we bid farewell to Edward Leigh MP after almost 10 years of service as our President. His faith and fortitude have been the foundation of our work over the past decade."

"Thanks to all our guests for joining us for a very special evening in Parliament."

The Catholic Union added that it is "particularly good to go out with a Papal Blessing, bestowed on all our members."



Cardinal Nichols says a few words to thank Sir Edward. Inset, the papal message



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COMMENT

In praise of the Commonwealth

The King, still undergoing treatment for cancer, will have been disappointed to miss the annual Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey this week. As head of the 75-year-old institution, he cherishes the familial relationships it nurtures across the globe. The Queen represented him and a virtual message was relayed to representatives of the 56 countries that make up what he called a unique diplomatic success story. In it he hailed the “diversity” of the Commonwealth as its core strength.

We live in a world where it seems that every historic resentment is used to attack the one-time imperial powers, and especially the UK. So it's an interesting fact that so many former colonies remain members of a body that grew out of that chequered past. It is testament to its longevity and diversity, with more than two billion people living in countries ranging from the most populous – India – to some of the world's smallest.

The Commonwealth has even increased in size with the admission of French speaking countries like Cameroon and Rwanda, together with the former Portuguese colony of Mozambique.

Multilateral institutions are often derided as talking shops and some Commonwealth members can be criticised for their lack of democracy and dubious human rights records. But it is the only organisation outside the UN to bring together rich and poor countries globally rather than regionally. It has a role observing elections in member states and provides guidance on administrative, judicial and regulatory reform.

The Commonwealth is a powerful agent for political and economic change in the developing world, with the UK playing a central role. Those who feared Brexit would leave Britain isolated can rest assured that there are other, older ties beyond Europe.

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Police get budget money for first responder drones – but new tech won't solve the issues facing UK forces

POLITICS

**John
Coxhead**

At a time when UK taxpayers are contributing record-high levels to public services, there is little to show for it when it comes to police and crime prevention. There are record lows in public confidence in police, and very poor criminal justice outcomes.

This is due to a lack of investment in recruiting, retaining, training and deploying the best people in policing.

But instead of earmarking more money for these, the Government has announced £230 million in the Budget for money-saving technology for police, including drones to deploy as a first response to some 999 calls.

I'm the founder of an Innovation in Policing competition, so I'm no technophobe. I know first hand how technology can improve police performance, by improving IT systems, using body cams to record evidence and to recruit virtual volunteers, but I'm concerned that the Government is rushing towards using public money for techno gimmicks to justify years of cuts to vital services.

In England and Wales, police are funded by a combination of annual government grants and funds from local council taxes. This year's £18.4 billion grant is an increase of £842.9 million from the previous year, and already includes £500.9 million for police technology.

But, in reality, the lack of investment in policing for over a decade due to austerity, financial reserves have been exhausted and much experience has been lost.

Since 2010, central government police funding has fallen by about 20 per cent in real terms. Hundreds of police stations have closed in that time, and local officers have disappeared from communities.

The Government grant is allocated to forces depending on populations and crime priorities. In the coming year, £45.6 million is to tackle serious violence, £17.6 million to combat exploitation and abuse, and £30 million to drugs. None of these amounts are anywhere near that earmarked for



technology that we can ill-afford to prioritise when we can't fund the basics well enough.

Much of the money goes to maintaining buildings, replacing worn-out vehicles and recruiting new officers to fill the huge personnel gaps caused by austerity. That's before funding new challenges, including on-going protests; as an example, an extra 2,000 officers' time was needed to keep a single Armistice weekend demonstration secure.

The government-commissioned Policing Productivity Review regards new technology as key to future productivity, aiming to save 38 million hours of officer time. But a focus on drones rather than detectives is worrying.

Flashy tech won't solve existing problems

Over the last few years, the percentage of crimes recorded that lead to someone being charged has dropped to around 5.5 per cent on average, from 16 per cent in 2015.

Two days before the Budget, it was reported that police failed to solve any burglaries in half of neighbourhoods in England and Wales in the last three years. The British Retail Crime Survey reported that retailers are not even bothering to report crimes, such as violence against staff, as 64 per cent of those surveyed thought it would not be taken seriously.

The police inspectorate says low charge rates show that the police are not getting the basics right.

Due to austerity funding cuts, police forces in England and Wales were starved of personnel for over a decade, shedding thousands of experienced people before the 2019 drive to recruit 20,000 officers. This has resulted in most of the frontline being staffed with junior, inexperienced officers, many in need of further training.

The current issues facing policing are better served by investing in human skills and trust to get the basics of crime-solving right, and

earn back public confidence after a horrible few years.

Half of the public do not trust professional standards in policing, no doubt influenced by things like the rape, kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard, and the shooting of Chris Kaba.

With inconsistent investigations and poor police-community relations, I am not convinced that trying to cut corners further by investing in drones over detectives, and replacing 'Bobbies with Bots' is the right plan.

Introducing new technology also comes with risks, as drones could be vulnerable to hackers and other criminals.

The public are paying the most-ever tax and not seeing results – this is not the time to use them as guinea pigs.

John Coxhead is Professor of Policing, Crime prevention, Learning & Innovation, University of East London

“Over the last few years, the percentage of crimes recorded that lead to someone being charged has dropped to around 5.5 per cent on average, from 16 per cent in 2015 ... the police failed to solve ANY burglaries in half of neighbourhoods in England and Wales in the last three years...”



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IMAGE: BABY GIRL BORN AT 6TH MONTH OF PREGNANCY



Society for the Protection
of Unborn Children

Transplanting roots

Sir John Battle



The story of the iconic Sycamore Gap tree on Hadrian's Wall, sadly chopped down to a stump, is thankfully, not over. Bio-scientists who are experts at growing seeds from plant fragments at a specialist arboretum centre in the south-west have brought the damaged sycamore back to tiny life and it is growing again, to be replanted in the future. In other words, the Sycamore Gap tree has been saved and will live into the future.

This is scientific ingenuity rather than a resurrection miracle, but it does highlight how radical change can still ensure that the original essence is conserved.

Perhaps it provides a positive example for something being discussed at the moment, namely employees' National Insurance Contributions (NIC), which the Chancellor pledged was an unfair tax he intended to end. But ending then would cut down the only long-standing pillar of our welfare state's 'social security' system. NIC was first introduced by Lloyd George in 1911 as the basis of a welfare state. Contributions from those in work provided universal health insurance and unemployment relief for all. It was welcomed as our country's greatest act of public health and social justice on which NHS, pensions and social security benefits were built. The NICs established a common kitty to support all 'from cradle to grave'.

Unlike in the USA, where the term 'welfare' is scorned and regarded as an indication of failure, our welfare state has been long regarded worldwide as a model of social solidarity, a compact of inclusion.

Of course, in a larger and more complex world, developing the best tax and benefits structure has remained a challenge. Sir Iain Duncan Smith as Secretary of State tried hard to resolve it by introducing Universal Credits. A fairer and less complicated tax and benefits system remains a challenge today, as does the need to ensure pensions and sickness support to an ageing population in a society of fewer young employees to contribute.

But the answer cannot be to cut down the central pillar of our national tax system, one that embodies 'solidarity' (a key concept of Catholic Social teaching), but rather to get our best economic and political brains together to rebuild an inclusive supportive welfare state for all in our radical changing economic and social circumstances, one which regards tax from the outset as a moral contribution to a common kitty.

Let's not give up on Lent: the sacrifices we make are worth it

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Caroline Farrow



It's incredible to think that we are already most of the way through Lent, even though Easter does fall exceptionally early this year. I've noticed this year that there seems to have been less of a focus on Lent, or at least in mainstream media and on social media in any event.

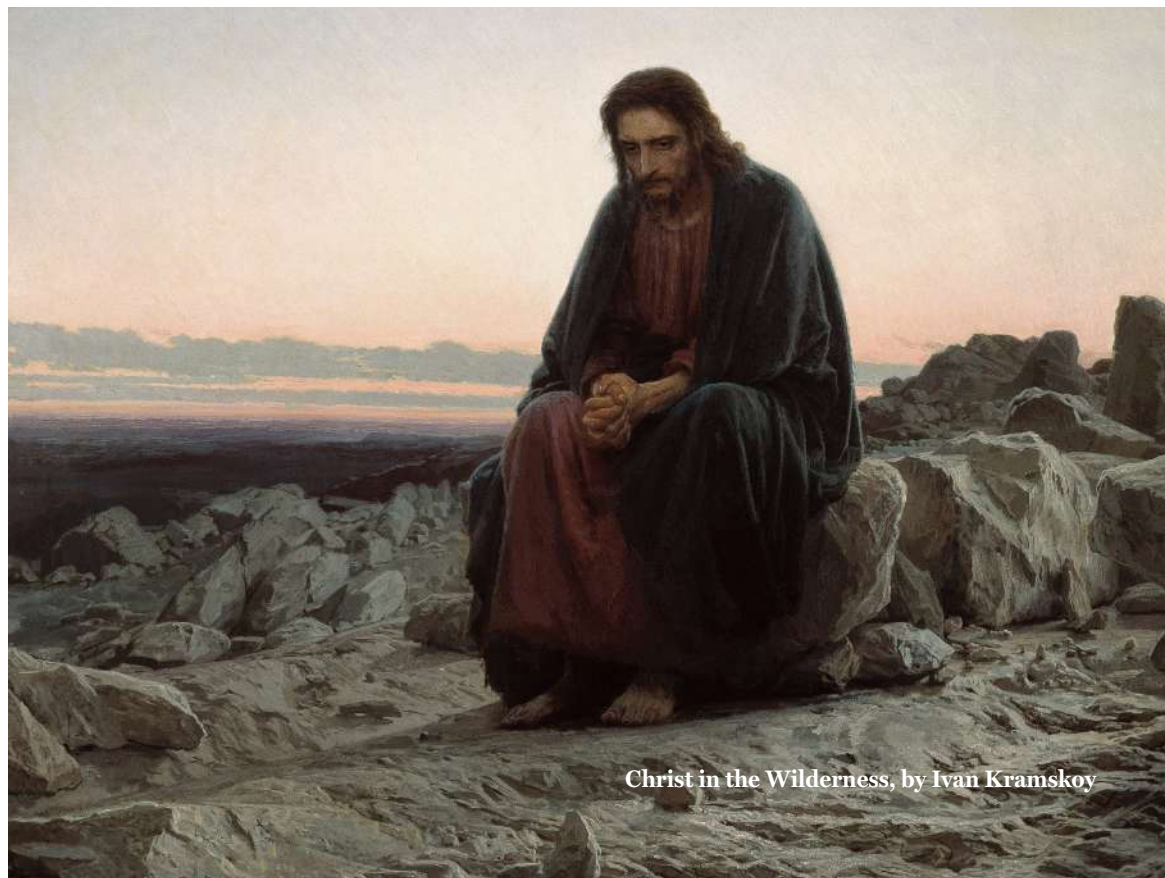
That's not due to a lack of effort on behalf of the Catholic Church in the UK who, if you happen to be on X, the site formerly known as Twitter, have been posting some interesting content, including Lenten reflections under the username *@catholicew*.

Social media is not the ideal medium for evangelisation, or at least sites like Twitter aren't, because they have become increasingly noisy and a place where people come to catch up on the news and essentially gossip or give their own opinionated take on current affairs, often in a very provocative fashion.

The whole nature of social media is designed to encourage users to continuously scroll for more content rather than to pause, contemplate, reflect and draw nearer to God, which is one of the reasons why I have recently been putting limits on my own use, including switching off notifications if I am using a different app on my device for prayer. The last thing you need while praying the daily office, reflecting on a piece of scripture or, as I sometimes do on my phone, pray the rosary, is to have some trivial notification pop up about the Princess of Wales or the Oscars.

I was, however, encouraged the other day when I was drawn into a conversation between feminists who were giving each other a hot take about the different approaches taken to fasting amongst Catholics, Christians more generally, Muslims and Jews. What had sparked the conversation was that a highly controversial and seemingly popular figure on Tik Tok appears to be having a flirtation with Islam, is on holiday in Egypt and posted a video of her 13-year-old son embarking on the Ramadan fast with no food or water, in 28-degree heat, in solidarity with the people of Gaza who are experiencing extreme deprivations.

In many ways her son's actions were entirely admirable, and one can read the apparent similarities between the Muslim and Christian



Christ in the Wilderness, by Ivan Kramskoy

traditions, but obviously, many people were concerned about what effect going without food or water might have on the boy.

I was keen to emphasise the Christian tradition by way of contrast, emphasising that it was gentler, that children under the age of 14 were not expected to participate and that, generally speaking, I would not be encouraging young people who are still growing to go without food or water during daylight hours, especially when it was hot. The only way in which I impose fasting upon the children during Lent is that I make a point of not buying or making biscuits, cakes, crisps, sweets and fizzy drinks, which are luxury, treat items as well as highly unhealthy.

The point of Lent is that one should attempt to undergo some form of bodily mortification, which is not, as a non-Christian might imagine, about self-flagellation, but to offer some sacrifice that really bites, both as a reminder of Christ's period and temptation in the wilderness and as an offering to God. Fasting or going without something physical that you may

have placed a lot of value on, instils self-restraint and aids spiritual discipline, helping us to appreciate the abundance of what we do have.

All too often I see Christians doing the one thing that we are not supposed to do in Lent, and that is announcing their Lenten resolutions, often as a way of demeaning other, more minor sacrifices; interestingly, this was a theme that emerged in this conversation. People were deriding the Islamic practice of loading up on food before sunrise and after sunset as not being real fasting, such as the fasting that used to be undertaken by Catholics hundreds of years ago, or by the fasting of Jews at Yom Kippur, which entails a strict 24-hour fast without food or water.

I was left feeling defensive over the idea that giving up a daily Cafe Nero habit could be considered a meaningful sacrifice or fast, but for many people, it is, especially if they have inadvertently become addicted to caffeine.

Without saying what my particular intention has been, it is something that I have become habituated to. I was on the verge of breaking it this week because I felt

tired, run-down, and in need of comfort and thought, 'you know what, stuff it, I'm going to have it and just enjoy myself'.

It took a real act of will to, at the last minute, decide 'no, I'm not going to have this' and as I did so, I made a conscious offering to God, realising that in real terms, my sacrifice might have seemed small. Still, it was nonetheless challenging and every bit as worthwhile as a more drastic effort. While not meaning to devalue those who undertake serious fasting, those who are more used to this practice may have built up a more robust resilience which does not require the same effort and act of will as someone endeavouring to give something up for the first time.

The thing to remember about Lent is that it isn't a competition for virtue or personal piety, but a period in which to grow closer to God so that we can truly participate in the Passion of Holy Week.

If at times we have fallen short of our resolutions, it is not too late to pick up and try again.

Even though it might feel as though Lent is almost over, I've discovered a renewed enthusiasm for fasting in the final stretch towards Easter. If you haven't already begun, or if you've even started and given up on giving up, whether it's social media, watching your favourite TV programme or going without pudding after dinner, I strongly recommend doing all you can to make this Easter a memorable one.

"The point of Lent is that one should attempt to undergo some form of bodily mortification, which is not about self-flagellation, but to offer some sacrifice that really bites, both as a reminder of Christ's period and temptation in the wilderness and as an offering to God..."

Priest's shock over fake funeral at the Oratory

Andy Drozdziak

A Catholic priest has spoken of his shock after arriving at a London church to conduct a funeral only to find that there was no body and some of the mourners present were actors.

Fr Rupert McHardy was asked to preside over the funeral of a 23-year-old Latvian man called Lauris Zaube, who had been missing since New Year, at London Oratory Catholic church in South Kensington.

However, Fr Rupert McHardy discovered that, when undertakers went to collect the body, they were told, 'there is no body, we have ashes.'

The funeral was then cancelled when Fr Rupert confirmed that there was no body present in the coffin. He was also shocked to find that the mourners present were actors and had been paid to be attend.

A man he knew as Clyde Zaube, who he took to be a relative of the deceased, had organised the funeral, having been in contact and chosen the funeral readings. However,



on the day, Zaube refused to acknowledge Fr Rupert and "it became clear he wasn't who he claimed to be".

In a macabre twist, half of the congregation turned out to be actors and the other half were described as 'sinister-looking.'

Fr Rupert said: "When I realised it wasn't a real funeral we said 'we can't do this'."

"We asked the mourners to leave and they all left relatively happily."

Fr Rupert found the experience 'very, very weird'.

"If they had been a real family they would have been weeping and crying."

"The church was paid. The funeral directors were paid. We haven't lost any money but it's very, very weird," he said.

"I was quite shaken afterwards. I felt very disturbed by it. Normally you take people at their word. No expense was spared - top hats, a horse-drawn hearse, two expensive vintage cars, a full choir."

Police are currently investigating the incident.

Fr Chris ready to run the Camino for Caritas

Andy Drozdziak

A parish priest from Bolton is taking on the ultimate challenge this summer by running the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage.

Fr Chris Gorton, from St Cuthbert's church in Bolton, will run the famous trail in aid of Caritas Salford, covering a distance of 924 kilometres – the equivalent of running from Manchester to Dundee and back again.

His challenge will last from 16th September until 23rd October.

He said: "I want it to be a shared experience to help raise awareness and funds for the different Caritas projects which are close to my heart."

"It will hopefully encourage other people to take on the challenge of walking the Camino or another challenge in aid of Caritas."

Fr Chris said that the run will also contain elements of the traditional pilgrimage experience.

"Runners are called 'Rungrims' but I'll certainly be putting the shell on my rucksack to make it clear this is a pilgrimage too," he said.

"The medieval Christian world talked about the four stages of pilgrimage: the first is the call to go and I really sense that. I look forward to sharing some of the mo-

ments of training and challenges along the way."

His challenge is part of Caritas Salford's Every Step campaign, which is asking people to consider doing a challenge to push them out of their comfort zone in 2024.

A special pack has been put together for local schools, with resources available to help them as they take part in the challenge.

Fr Chris Gorton has received support from the Bishop of Salford, John Arnold, who said the run was "quite a challenge," and asked parishioners "if we can help him along the way."

Patrick O'Dowd, director of Caritas Salford, paid tribute to Fr Chris's "amazing" challenge and encouraged schools to get involved in Every Step.

"We're in awe of this amazing challenge and we can't wait to hear more as he continues his training."



• Fr Chris's Justgiving page can be found at www.justgiving.com/page/fr-chris-camino

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In Brief

Police ‘broke rules’ on complaint over JK Rowling

Police broke freedom of speech rules by recording a ‘misgendering’ complaint against Harry Potter author JK Rowling as a “hate incident”, a woman’s group has said.

India Willoughby has claimed that Northumbria Police had formerly logged a ‘non-crime hate incident’ (NCHI) over an online row in which the transgender TV personality was publicly called a male by Rowling.

While Northumbria Police deemed that Rowling had not committed a criminal offence, Willoughby leapt on the force’s response to suggest they had officially backed up her view that Rowling is transphobic.

No space left in male prisons

Fewer than 250 spaces are left in men’s jails in England and Wales, as the Justice Secretary sanctioned the biggest early release scheme from prisons in nearly 20 years.

Alex Chalk announced emergency measures to release hundreds of burglars, shoplifters and violent criminals up to 60 days early to tackle the crisis.

He also unveiled plans to slash the number of foreign prisoners – now standing at over 10,000 – by refusing tourist visa applications from countries that fail to take back their criminals earmarked for deportation.

He also confirmed plans to allow foreign shoplifters, thieves and drug dealers to be deported rather than prosecuted.

Cambridge to scrap ‘unjust’ state targets

The University of Cambridge is scrapping its targets for undergraduate admissions from the state school sector.

The university said it would take candidates’ schools into account when selecting students, but that it no longer proposed to have a target for the share of state and private school pupils winning places.

It comes after Cambridge was accused of discriminating against pupils from private schools amid a decline in offer rates at top independent institutions.

Prof Deborah Prentice, who took over as vice-chancellor last summer, rejected claims of discrimination against privately educated pupils, saying instead that competition is fiercer as more state school pupils have been encouraged to apply over the past few years.

Russian soldiers’ wives are the quiet opponents Putin fears

Jennifer Mathers and Natasha Danilova

International Women’s Day is widely celebrated in Russia. But amid the bouquets of flowers and stilted speeches of congratulation made by Vladimir Putin, the state-controlled media will be doing its best to ignore one group of Russia’s women.

These are the wives of some of its soldiers fighting in Ukraine, who have embarked on a series of regular, public demonstrations that challenge the state and its narratives of societal unity around the war.

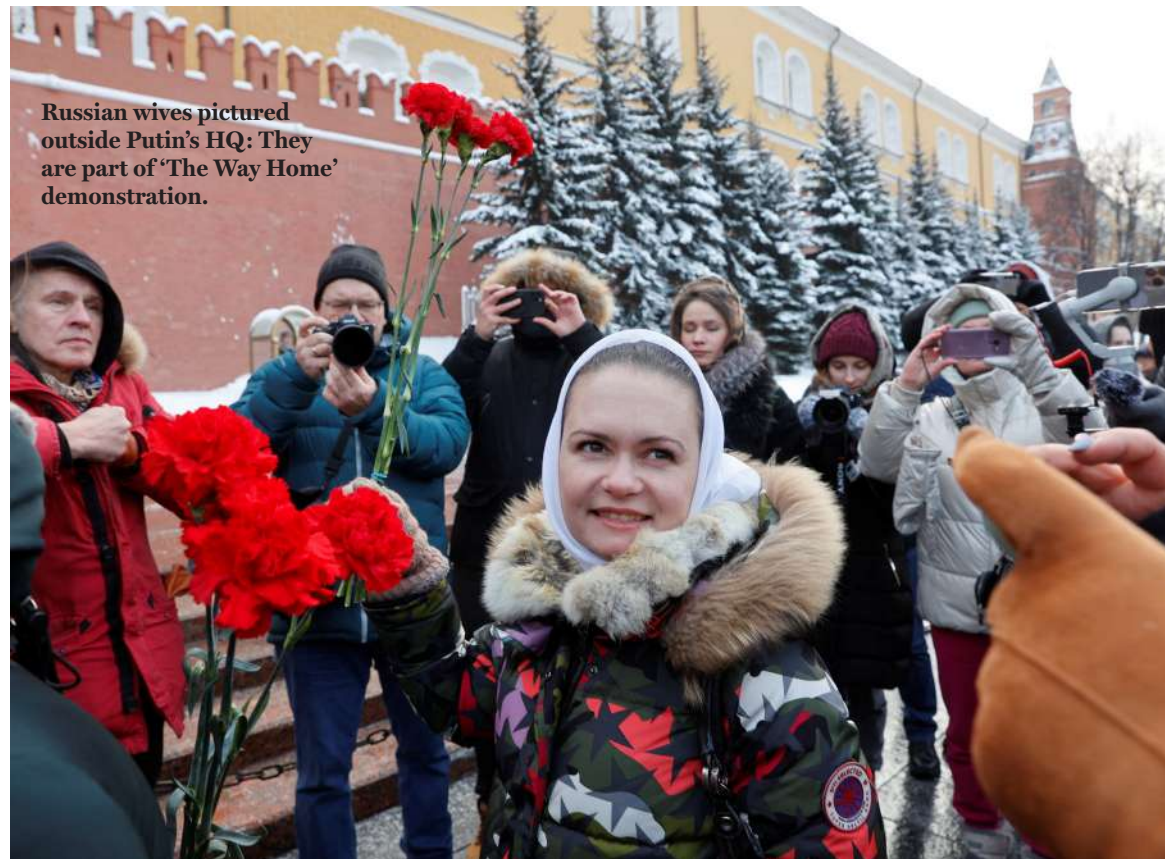
When Russia began its mass invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it was widely expected that soldiers’ mothers would participate in public protests against the war and demand the return of their sons, as they did in Russia’s war in Chechnya in the mid-1990s, and Afghanistan in the 1980s. But these mothers have all but disappeared from view under increasingly harsh crackdowns on opposition to the war.

Instead, it is soldiers’ wives who have emerged as one of the few sources of open criticism of the state’s handling of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

The prominence of wives rather than mothers of soldiers reflects the fact the war is not being fought by conscripts in their late teens and early twenties. Instead, many of the soldiers are married men in their 30s, 40s and even 50s. These men were mobilised, as reservists, on Putin’s order in September 2022, and are serving open-ended deployments to Ukraine. These are men who previously served in the army as conscripts, aged up to about 60.

These mobilised soldiers, along with those recruited from prisons, are regarded as expendable by their military commanders. They are sent into the most dangerous combat missions, and are more likely to be injured and killed than professional soldiers, according to a BBC-Mediazona project that is attempting to track Russian casualties.

Our ongoing research suggests the main strategy that women in Russia’s military families have adopted in dealing with the state is “patriotic dissent”. Avoiding direct criticism of the war, they emphasise they are the loyal wives of men who are doing their duty for their country. They focus on trying to gain specific concessions from the state, such as periods of leave for their husbands or more extensive welfare support for military families. They also use social media, and especially Telegram, to share information including



Russian wives pictured outside Putin’s HQ: They are part of ‘The Way Home’ demonstration.

strategies for lobbying Russia’s ministry of defence.

But among the many Telegram channels set up by wives of mobilised soldiers, one called The Way Home has become the focus of more confrontational forms of protest. Angered by the announcement in autumn 2023 that mobilised soldiers would be deployed to Ukraine indefinitely, the women behind the channel decided to go beyond pleading with the state.

In November 2023, The Way Home wives issued a manifesto calling for an end to the mobilisation of civilians to fight in the “special military operation”. They also started taking their complaints beyond social media.

Some actions are relatively modest, such as putting stickers on cars calling for the return of their husbands. Others are much more difficult for the state to ignore.

Since January, small groups have gathered every Saturday to lay flowers at eternal flames around Russia, including at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier by the Kremlin wall in Moscow. Wearing white headscarves and holding signs calling for an end to mobilisation, the wives have also urged widows of soldiers who have been killed in the war to join them.

So far, the state has ignored these demands for an end to mobilisation, and is attempting to placate the wives by expanding benefits for military families – including changing the rules to permit payments to be made to the unmarried partners of soldiers – a blatant contradiction of Putin’s emphasis on marriage and

traditional family values.

Protests are broken up but when the wives are detained, they are released with a warning. However, the women are clearly coming under pressure. Some have reported police visiting their homes to warn them against protesting. They have been verbally attacked by Russian media personality Vladimir Solovyov, and Telegram has inserted a “fake” label on The Way Home channel.

Although The Way Home wives have demonstrated they are capable of holding public demonstrations that are critical of the state’s handling of the war, Russia’s political opposition has so far dismissed their potential to become a political force. Instead, the wives are described as naive for failing to oppose the war itself, and complicit because they accept – and seek – money from the state in the form of welfare benefits.

Long history of activism

This dismissive attitude towards the activism of women in military families has a long history in Russia. In 1917, women – known as *soldatki* (soldiers’ wives and other female family members) – played an important role in the social unrest that overturned the monarchy and paved the way for the Bolshevik revolution.

But the *soldatki* were patronised by both Tsarist and Soviet political leaders. Described as ignorant because they couched their demands in terms of the welfare of their families rather than in the language of political ideology, they

have also been left out of most historical accounts of the revolutions in 1917.

It is important to maintain a sense of perspective about these protests. The Way Home wives represent a small subsection of the hundreds of thousands of wives and mothers of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. They express strongly nationalistic views – their manifesto explicitly distances them from ‘migrants’ and other non-Russian soldiers deployed to fight in Ukraine, as well as from prisoners. They have not voiced sorrow or regret for the thousands of Ukrainians killed and injured by Russia’s attacks.

But it would also be a mistake to overlook the significance and the political nature of these soldiers’ wives’ actions. By calling for an end to mobilisation, The Way Home wives are challenging Putin’s strategy of waging “forever war” until Moscow achieves its aims.

These women are also exercising the fundamental right of citizens to hold their government accountable for its policies – there is no more political act than this.

Ultimately, women’s “patriotic dissent” is a powerful form of resistance and it must be taken seriously.

Jennifer Mathers is a Senior Lecturer in International Politics, Aberystwyth University
Natasha Danilova is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen

Sir Keir told not to ignore the dangers of assisted suicide

Andy Drozdziak

Opponents of assisted suicide have hit back at Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer's promise to provide parliamentary time for a vote on legalising assisted suicide if Labour wins the election.

Starmer, who has previously spoken of his support for a change in the law, announced his decision after meeting Dame Esther Rantzen, who has publicly called on Parliament to back a change in the current law.

Currently, assisting someone to commit suicide is illegal under the Suicide Act 1961 and carries the possible sentence of up to 14 years in prison.

Starmer told Dame Esther that a Labour Government would allow MPs time to debate and vote on a change in the law, adding that there would need to be "safeguards with teeth" to help protect the most vulnerable from the risk of coercion or abuse.

However, CEO of Care Not Killing Dr Gordon Macdonald warned Sir Keir Starmer of the real dangers of legalising assisted suicide, including radically altering the patient/doctor relationship.

"Changing the law to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia in the UK would represent a dramatic change in how doctors and nurses treat and care for people and put the



Sir Keir Starmer

lives of the vulnerable, terminally ill and disabled people at risk," Dr Macdonald told *The Times*.

"Sir Keir needs to recognise the real dangers associated with legalising state-sanctioned killing, such as the pressure it puts on people to end their lives prematurely, and the growing body of evidence showing assisted suicide appears [to] normalise suicide in the general populations."

Social policy charity Christian Action Research and Education (CARE) acknowledged that this is "a highly emotive topic", but called instead for investment in "high quality palliative care" to support those at the end of life.

CARE said: "Pioneered by a Christian, palliative care is a holistic form of care, which addresses relational, mental, emotional, spiritual and physical pain.

"In this way, we can help ensure a good death, without taking the step to give a patient a lethal drug so they can kill themselves."

CARE also pointed to the "burden" placed on those who are vulnerable, elderly or sick.

"Any assisted suicide law would place a genuine, yet subtle burden on some of the frailest in our communities. A message would be sent to them and others that if you are seriously ill, or infirm, perhaps you should think about ending your own life so you are not a burden," CARE said.



Dame Esther Rantzen

Better weather... forecasts on way

The Great Storm of 1987 didn't just destroy 15 million trees. It also shook the nation's faith in the weather forecast. After all, who can forget TV weatherman Michael Fish declaring to viewers worried that a hurricane was on the way: "Don't worry, there isn't!"

Nearly 40 years later, scientists are a lot more confident in their data, and now a 15-year research programme has been launched to

provide even more accurate forecasts up to six weeks ahead.

The ambitious £30 million partnership between Reading University, the Met Office and the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts will use climate data extracted from a wider variety of sources, then crunch it through supercomputers to provide "super accurate weather forecasts," they said.

Safety concerns lead to NHS ban on puberty blockers

Children will no longer be given dangerous puberty blockers, NHS England has said, after it admitted there is not enough evidence that they are safe.

The UK Government welcomed the announcement, calling it a "landmark decision" which was "in the best interests of children."

NHS England consulted on the ban which was first proposed in June last year.

Puberty blockers stop the physical changes in a child's body normally associated with puberty, such as breast development or facial hair.

From this point on, children and young people will only be able to get puberty blockers if they are taking part in a clinical trial.

Following the announcement, health minister Maria Caulfield said: "We have always been clear that children's safety and wellbeing is paramount, so we welcome this landmark decision by the NHS.

"Ending the routine prescription of puberty blockers will help ensure that care is based on evidence, expert clinical opinion and is in the best interests of the child."

Universe columnist Caroline Farrow welcomed the decision as "fantastic news" but added that the ban needed to be extended to private clinics.

Last year, an independent review



The Tavistock Centre has previously been criticised for its use of puberty blockers

into gender identity services for under 18s published interim advice which warned strongly against the routine prescription of puberty blockers.

Campaign group, Sex Matters, which campaigns on how sex is used in law, praised NHS England for the decision. Executive Director Maya Forstater called the move a "step in the right direction."

"This is a momentous development in the course correction of NHS England's approach to treating childhood gender distress. Many have been calling on the NHS for years to return to an evi-

dence-based approach. This is a definite step in the right direction," she said.

"The significance of NHS England's statement that there is not enough evidence to support the safety or clinical effectiveness of puberty blockers cannot be overstated, given the success that activist lobby groups have had in portraying them as harmless and reversible."

Maria Caulfield 'welcomed this landmark decision by the NHS.'



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Public Engagement by Catholics for the Common Good

JRS demands action after report slams food given to asylum seekers

Andy Drozdziak

Jesuit Refugee Service UK is calling for change after a 'horrifying' report revealed that asylum seekers in London face malnutrition due to the poor quality of food provided by the Home Office.

The report, entitled *Food experiences of people seeking asylum in London: areas for local action*, published this week by Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming, found serious issues with food offered to people seeking asylum in London.

Concerns were raised about food in catered accommodation, with evidence of poor food safety and lack of provision for people with medical conditions and allergies, in some cases leading to hospitalisation.

Food provided at hotels was described as 'completely inappropriate' and does not meet the nutritional needs of either children or breastfeeding mothers. Unsafe infant feeding was provided, with parents lacking access to equipment to sterilise and store bottles.

Sarah Teather, director of Catholic refugee charity Jesuit Refugee Service UK, believes the findings are the product of Government policies which fail to provide adequately for asylum seekers.

"This report lays bare the horrifying impact of food insecurity for people in the asylum system: children going to bed crying in hunger, people becoming ill because of the only food they can eat, a daily struggle to make ends meet," she said.

"These are ultimately the result of a deliberate policy to force people seeking asylum to live in poverty. This should not be normal. As this report reveals these realities, it also shows that it doesn't have to be this way. We can, and must, change this."

Sustain worked with the Jesuit Refugee Service UK and Life Seekers Aid to conduct the research between October 2023 and February 2024. The research included focus groups with people with lived experience of the asylum system, interviews with local authorities, health-care providers and voluntary and community sector organisations, and a workshop with local authorities and food partnerships.

The report found some stark statistics. For asylum seekers, poor



food experiences were common, with a lack of money, little to no kitchen access and inadequate food provision inevitably leading to undernourishment in children and diabetes in adults, as well as poor mental health.

Sarah Teather believes change is long overdue to address such problems.

"It is not an accident that people in the asylum system struggle to access the food they need. It is the result of a deliberate policy to force people seeking sanctuary to live in poverty," she said.

"This report gives insight into the deep human cost of that policy. It also gives a window onto instances where local communities have come together to begin to shape a more human response. It demonstrates that a different approach is possible - and badly needed. Change is long overdue."

Isabel Rice, London Food Poverty campaign co-ordinator at Sustain, echoed Sarah Teather's call for change. She said: "The shocking findings of this report are a clear call to action."

"People seeking sanctuary in this country should have their nutritional needs met, and agency over the food they eat. This report reveals that this is not happening, with catastrophic impacts on people's physical and mental health."

The report makes recommendations for local authorities to work with key local actors to tackle issues around food that people seeking asylum are facing.

It also calls for change around national policies which are driving food insecurity and malnutrition among people seeking asylum and making local action challenging.

Student pro-life group commits to events after enforced pause

Andy Drozdziak

A pro-life student group has committed to continue its activities after the University of Manchester temporarily cancelled future in-person events.

The cancellation came after hundreds of pro-choice supporters shouted intimidating language and spat on members of the Manchester Pro Life Society after its first meeting on 29th February, as reported in last week's *Universe*.

The university released a statement confirming that the Student Union "has a legal duty" to approve the pro-life society.

"We encourage our students to engage in lawful debate and we support peaceful and respectful protest,

as well as the right to free speech and expression within the law. We affirm that any and all forms of harassment, intimidation and abuse have no place in our community," the university said.

"Our Students' Union has a legal duty to approve a society if it is not breaking the law."

Manchester Pro Life Society member Jacob Karinatedan, 20, called the university statement "pretty vague", but said that the university will allow the pro-life society to meet again after Easter.

"We did have a meeting with university staff the day after the first event - during which the uni allowed us to hold future events," Jacob told the *Universe*. These events

will take place after Easter.

Following the initial meeting, the new society reaffirmed its commitment "to continue to boldly stand up for life and free speech on campus."

Madeline Page, the director of the Alliance of Pro-Life Students, said the University of Manchester has "a legal obligation to proactively support free speech," while the executive director of SPUC, Michael Robinson, told the *Universe* that "students of all opinions must be protected."

He added: "The increase in attacks on pro-life students, stalls and other anti-abortion initiatives on campuses in recent years is shocking. and needs to be stopped."



Pro-lifers required a police escort to leave an event at the end of February

New report highlights real progress after prison social workers work with mums

All women's prisons should have social workers dedicated to supporting mothers in custody to stay in touch with their children, where it is in the child's best interests, Catholic prison charity Pact has said.

The call coincides with the publication of an independent evaluation report by Cardiff University of a pilot project which employs dedicated, prison-based social workers in two women's prisons - HMPs Send and Eastwood Park.

It sets out how the project has benefitted children and mothers and played a significant role in managing self-harm and the risk of

suicide. There were nearly 20,000 incidents of self-harm in women's prisons last year - the highest on record. The rate of self-harm per 1,000 prisoners in women's prisons increased by 38 per cent on the previous year and is over ten times higher than in men's prisons.

An estimated 17,000 children are affected by the imprisonment of a mother every year. The evaluation shows that supporting these relationships helps mothers and their children. Even where it is decided that mothers should not have contact with their children, the social workers support the women, help-

ing them to come to terms with this, minimising the risk of self-harm and suicide.

Andy Keen-Downs, Pact CEO, said: "This report sets out the crucial role of prison-based social workers in bridging the gap between mothers in prison and their children on the outside."

"This is the evidence that it works - now it's time for Ministers to invest in this simple, common-sense measure."

- Pact has produced a new toolkit for teachers in England who have children in their classes with a parent in prison.

It provides advice and support for educators, and also seeks to foster understanding about the issue in schools and to ensure that young people affected by imprisonment know that help is available.

Aimee Hutchinson, Children and Young People Lead at Pact, said imprisonment of a father or mother can have a devastating impact on children and young people. "But with the right support, children with a parent in prison will go on to lead happy and fulfilling lives."

"This tool kit will go some way to provide that support."



Special gifts for celebrating Easter ...

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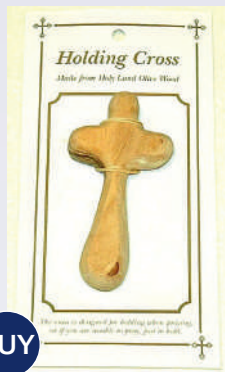


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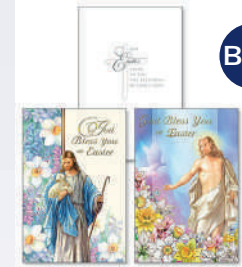
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No hiding place in our Church for abusers, says pope

Justin McLellan

The work of protecting minors and other vulnerable people in the Catholic Church involves holding those in positions of power accountable for the abuse they commit, Pope Francis said.

The Church's safeguarding efforts "must undoubtedly aim at eradicating situations that protect those who hide behind their positions to impose themselves on others in a perverse way," the pope said in a message to participants in a safeguarding conference.

He also said the Church must try to understand why such people are "unable to relate to others in a healthy way."

The message was delivered to a three-day conference in Panama City organised by the Research and Formation Center for the Protection of Minors.

The conference was designed to discuss 'the handling of power and authority in the Church' and to broaden conversations about abusive conduct beyond the crime of sexual abuse to include abuses of power, authority, conscience and spirituality.

The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors has already announced a study group "to examine the reality of vulnerable persons in the context of the Church's ministry and how this informs safeguarding efforts."

In his message to the participants in Panama City, Pope Francis wrote that God is calling the Church to "an



Pope Francis greets well-wishers outside the St Pius V church in Rome. Inside he had told an audience of 600 that they should not be afraid to confess their sins, as 'God has heard it all before'

absolute change in mentality regarding our conception of relationships," and that Christians must give priority to "the least, the poor, the servant (and) the uneducated over the greater, the rich, the master, the learned, based on the ability to accept the grace that is given to us by God and to make ourselves a gift to others."

"Seeing one's own weakness as an excuse to stop being whole persons and whole Christians, incapable of taking control of their destiny, will create childish, resentful people and in no way represents the littleness to

which Jesus invites us," he wrote. Instead, the pope urged the participants to imitate St. Paul who "boasted in his weaknesses and trusted in the grace of the Lord."

Yet Pope Francis wrote that the Church "cannot be indifferent to the reasons why some people accept to go against their own conscience, out of fear, or allow themselves to be deceived by false promises, knowing in their heart of hearts that they are on the wrong path."

"Humanising relationships" in society and the Church, he wrote, "means working hard to form ma-

ture, coherent persons who, firm in their faith and ethical principles, are capable of confronting evil (and) bearing witness to the truth."

He added that any society that lacks such moral integrity will be "ill, with human and institutional relationships perverted by selfishness, distrust, fear and deceit."

More than 20 members of CEPROME's advisory board from throughout Latin America met with Pope Francis at the Vatican in September 2023. They discussed methods for advancing abuse prevention and the pope condemned the acces-

Don't worry sinners: God's heard it before

Catholics should not be afraid to bear their sins before God whose mercy is a model for the Church's ministers, Pope Francis said.

"God never tires of forgiving," he said during a Lenten penance service. He then asked 600 people gathered at the parish of St. Pius V in Rome to repeat his words with him: "God never tires of forgiving!"

Before putting on a stole to personally hear confessions in the church, Pope Francis asked priests to "forgive always, like God who never tires of forgiving."

"Don't ask too much during confessions," he told the priests, instructing them to "forgive everything." "Let us always grant forgiveness to those who ask for it and help those who feel fear to confidently approach the sacrament of healing and joy," he said. "Let us put God's forgiveness back at the center of the church."

The pope was spirited while reading his speech, showing no sign of his recent bout of ill health. He frequently stopped to add personal anecdotes and to gather feedback from his audience.

Afterwards hundreds of people crowded outside the parish entrance to greet Pope Francis upon his arrival. Inside, pews were filled as the visibly animated pope engaged with the crowd.

Pope Francis asked people to "look at your sins, look at the bad things you have said and done." "In silence say to the Lord: 'Lord, if you wish you can make me clean.'"

Afterwards the pope heard confessions from nine members of the public.

Pope rallies Catholics to back Holy Land's Christians

Carol Glatz

Pope Francis has announced plans to launch a humanitarian project in Gaza or the West Bank with the possible help of the traditional Good Friday collection for the Holy Land.

"The outbreak of the war in Gaza, after the events of 7th October, paralysed the Holy Land. The lack of pilgrims and tourists has put thousands of families in difficulty," the Vatican said as it launched its annual appeal to bishops.

"The Holy Father intends to carry out humanitarian projects in Gaza or the West Bank, to help the population resume a more dignified life and create job opportunities once the war is over. This project could be realised with the offerings of the faithful from all over the world who participate in the collection for the Holy Land."

The *Pro Terra Sancta* collection is the main source of material support for Christians and the faith in the Holy Land, it said, and it is a way "for the universal Church to express solidarity with the ecclesial commu-

nities of the Middle East."

The collection "is not merely a pious tradition for a few," said Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti. "Everywhere in the Catholic Church, the faithful have an obligation to offer their contribution to the Holy Land's faithful."

"Apart from the custody of the holy places that saw Jesus, there are still Christians living and operating in the Holy Land, amid many tragedies and difficulties often caused by the selfishness of the powerful of the world."

Unfortunately, "many of them cannot take it anymore," and they are leaving everything behind to flee "because they see no hope. And ravenous wolves divide their spoils."

"I address you so that their cry does not go unheard and that the Holy Father can support the local churches in finding new ways, opportunities for housing, work and educational and professional training, so that they may remain and not get lost in the West," they wrote.

The Franciscan Custody of the



A deserted square in Jerusalem. The tourism sector has been devastated by the war

Holy Land, an administratively autonomous province of the Franciscan order, customarily receives 65 per cent of the funds collected to preserve sacred places connected with the life of Jesus and to support Christians through its many projects. The remainder of the collection goes to the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches to fund seminar-

ies, and faith and cultural projects.

Recent subsidies drawn from the collection have been used to support those affected by the devastating earthquakes that struck Turkey and Syria in early 2023, the Vatican said.

With the war in Gaza, "the dicastery is following the development of the situation, demonstrating its

closeness through the apostolic delegation in Jerusalem, the Latin Patriarchate and the Custody of the Holy Land," it said, adding that it hopes to use funds from this year's collection to help Pope Francis carry out a humanitarian project in Gaza or the West Bank.

The Vatican has revealed how funds from the collection were distributed in 2023. A total of £6.3 million was collected, with funds going out to support pilgrim facilities, benefit the local community, assist refugees, provide emergency and development aid, and pay the salaries of employees.

The worsened war between Palestine and Israel, it said, "has brought a sudden cancellation of all pilgrimages" and the closure of all checkpoints has made it impossible for workers from the West Bank to enter Jerusalem.

The custody "has continued to provide equally for the payment of wages" for workers from the West Bank who are no longer able to get into Jerusalem, it said.

Coptic Church backs away from talks over same-sex blessings

The Coptic Orthodox Church has suspended all dialogue with the Catholic Church because of what it says is the Vatican's "change of position" on homosexuality and blessings for same-sex couples.

The Copts' annual Holy Synod in Wadi El-Natrun in Egypt, which took place at the start of March, confirmed that it would "suspend theological dialogue with the Catholic Church after its change of position on homosexuality."

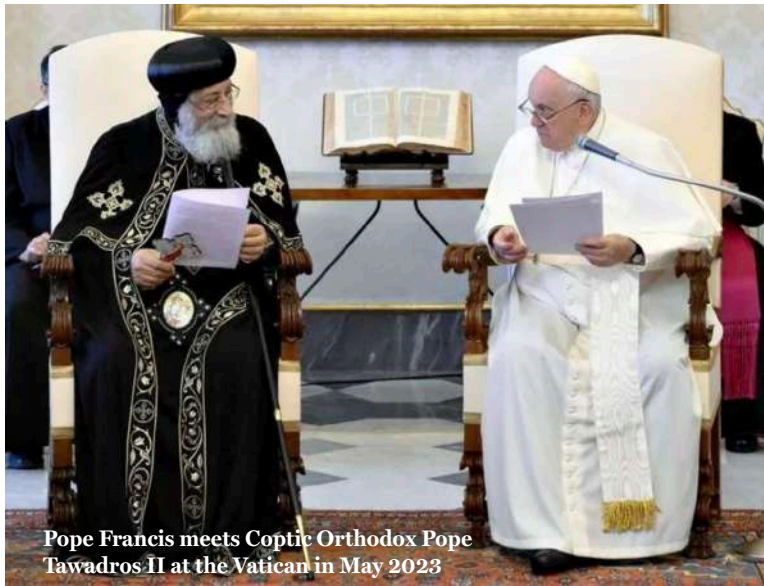
"After consulting with the sister Churches of the Eastern Orthodox family," the bishops said, "it was decided to suspend the theological dialogue with the Catholic Church, re-evaluate the results achieved by the dialogue from its beginning 20 years ago, and establish new standards and mechanisms for the dialogue to proceed in the future."

The leaders also reaffirmed their rejection of all same-sex relations, stating their "firm position of rejecting all forms of homosexual relationships, because they violate the Holy Bible and the law by which God created man as male and female, and the Church considers any blessing of such relations, whatever its type, to be a blessing for sin, and this is unacceptable."

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, headed by Pope Tawadros II, is one of the world's oldest Christian denominations. Its founding dates back to St. Mark the Apostle.

Although it describes itself as Orthodox, it is not in full communion with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Eastern Orthodoxy, but remains united with the Ethiopian, Armenian, Eritrean, Malankara and Syriac Orthodox churches.

Known collectively as the Oriental Orthodox churches, they have sought dialogue with Rome and



Pope Francis meets Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II at the Vatican in May 2023

Eastern Orthodoxy which for centuries had considered them heretical.

Last year, dialogue appeared to have progressed to such an extent that the Vatican allowed the Coptic Orthodox to celebrate their own Divine Liturgy in the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran in Rome.

The following month Pope Francis included 21 Coptic Orthodox faithful, martyred by Islamic State in Libya in 2015, in the Roman Martyrology — the Church's official list of martyrs, saints and blessed.

The Coptic Orthodox leaders' statement did not make any explicit reference to the Vatican document *Fiducia Supplicans* but their reassertion of their Church's teaching on homosexuality, firmly based on scripture, made the reason for the suspension of dialogue obvious.

They noted in their statement that God created man both male and female, that all persons are called to holiness, and that all are to live according to his will and "divine design for marriage between a man and a woman."

al help, but continues to break God's commandments, in that case, their situation becomes the same as someone who is living in adultery," the bishops said. "In such cases they must be advised to abstain from communion, and seek repentance."

Quoting from St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, the Coptic Orthodox underlined the Church's condemnation of same-sex attraction. "We firmly reject cultural contexts used to justify same-sex relationships... they damaging to humanity as a whole."

While they said they agreed with human rights and freedoms, "these freedoms are not absolute and must not be used to violate the laws of the Creator."

"The Church affirms its commitment to fulfilling its pastoral role in aiding individuals who have homosexual tendencies," they said in closing.

"It also emphasises that it does not reject them, but instead, provides support and assistance to help them achieve an emotional and spiritual solution."

"The Church places its trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think," they said.

Pope back to prison for Holy Thursday Mass

Pope Francis will continue his custom of celebrating Holy Thursday Mass in a prison during Holy Week 2024, the Vatican said.

The Vatican said he will visit a women's prison – the Rebibbia correctional facility in Rome – to celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper with people housed there and those who work at the facility.

He celebrated the Mass with male and female prisoners at the Rebibbia complex in 2015 as well, washing the feet of 12 inmates and a toddler. The prison's maternity section allows incarcerated mothers to keep their children with them until they are 3 years old.

Last year, Pope Francis visited a juvenile detention facility where he washed, dried and kissed the feet of 12 people.

The ceremony of washing another's feet – which follows the Gospel account of Jesus washing the feet of his 12 disciples – "is not folkloric," the pope said in 2023. It is a gesture that shows "how we are to be with one another."

Pope Francis has celebrated Mass at a prison, care facility or refugee center since becoming pope in 2013, while his recent predecessors customarily washed the feet of priests in St. Peter's Basilica or the Basilica of St. John Lateran.



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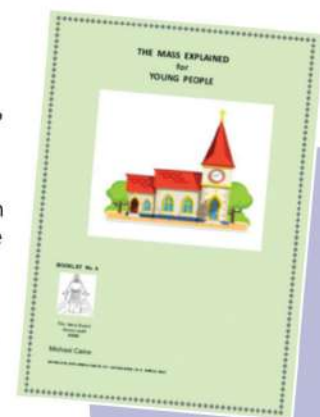
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Parolin to rescue after pope comes under fire for ‘white flag’ suggestion

The Vatican has moved frantically to soothe Ukrainian anger after the Holy Father suggested that the country would be better off and “braver” to negotiate a surrender with Russia – and wave “a white flag.”

In an interview with Swiss broadcaster RSI, when asked whether Ukraine should surrender, and if doing so would legitimise the actions of the stronger power, the pope said that “the strongest one is the one who looks at the situation, thinks about the people and has the courage of the white flag, and negotiates.”

“Negotiation is never a surrender,” he said. “It is the courage to not bring the country to suicide.”

Several Italian media outlets quickly began circulating stories on the interview, directly quoting the pope as saying that “Ukraine should have the courage to raise the white flag.”

Ukrainian Government, Church and diplomatic staff immediately slammed the comments. Ukraine’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said the pope was putting good and evil “on the same footing” and urged the Vatican to “avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and to support Ukraine and its people in their just struggle for their lives.”

In a reference to the colour of the flag to be raised he said: “Our flag is a yellow and blue one,” he said. “This is the flag by which we live, die, and prevail. We shall never raise any other flags.”



Pope Francis pictured with Andrii Yurash, Ukrainian ambassador to the Vatican, last year. The ambassador broke with diplomatic protocol when he directly criticised the Holy Father, saying he needed to learn lessons from the Second World War after he suggested Ukraine should be brave and surrender to Russia

His boss, Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, was clearly referring to the pope during his nightly address to the nation when he praised his country’s military chaplains for supporting the troops “with prayer, conversation and deeds.”

“This is what the Church is – it is together with people, not two and a half thousand kilometers away, somewhere virtually mediating between someone who wants to live and someone who wants to destroy you,” he said.

But Cardinal Pietro Parolin told reporters on Tuesday that the pope was not asking Ukraine to consider

surrendering to Russia when he called for negotiations to end the war, but he was calling for both Russia and Ukraine to cease hostilities and engage in peace talks.

It’s “obvious” that creating the conditions for a diplomatic resolution to the war in Ukraine “is not only up to one side, but to both sides,” Parolin told Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. The first step toward reaching peace, he added, is “to put an end to the aggression.”

The responsibility for ceasing hostilities in Ukraine falls “first and foremost to the aggressor,” he said without explicitly naming Russia.

Only then, he said, can negotiations begin.

“The Holy Father explains that to negotiate is not weakness, but strength. It is not surrender, but courage,” he said.

Ukrainian civil and church leaders attacked the pope’s comments. Without directly mentioning Pope Francis, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address on 10th March praised Church leaders who were on the frontline supporting Ukraine’s defence and “not two and a half thousand kilometers away somewhere virtually mediating between

someone who wants to live and someone who wants to destroy you.”

The country’s foreign minister said the pope’s call for negotiations appeared to put good and evil “on the same footing,” and the bishops of the Permanent Synod of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church said that “with Putin there will be no negotiations.”

The Ukrainian Embassy to the Holy See also weighed in with a strong criticism of the pope, and the Vatican’s nuncio to Ukraine, Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas, was summoned to the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be told how “disappointed” Ukraine was.

Instead of appeals appearing to legalise “the right of the strongest and encouraging him to neglect the norms of the international law,” the foreign ministry said in its statement, the pope should be encouraging the international community to unite “to ensure the victory of good over evil.”

The ministry also said the pope should be addressing his appeals “to the aggressor, not to the victim.”

Cardinal Parolin added that the Holy See is fundamentally concerned about the warring sides becoming “increasingly closed in on their own interests (and) not doing what they can to reach a just and stable peace.”

He also asked commentators to remember that Russia had the world’s second largest arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Church: We will resist Putin – no matter what pope says

Ukraine’s Greek Catholic bishops, led by Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, issued a strongly worded statement dismissing the pope’s idea, saying their nation will continue to fight Russian aggression, “notwithstanding the suggestions for need for negotiations coming from representatives of different countries, including from the Holy Father himself.

They pointed out that “every Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory leads to the eradication of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, any independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and to the suppression of other religions and all institutions and cultural expressions that do not support Russian hegemony.”

“Ukrainians will continue to defend freedom and dignity to achieve a peace that is just. They believe in freedom and God-given human dignity. They believe in truth, God’s truth. They are convinced that God’s truth will prevail.”

Signing the statement were the permanent synod’s members: Major Archbishop Shevchuk of Kyiv-Halych, head of the worldwide Ukrainian Greek Catholic

Church; Metropolitan Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Archeparchy of Philadelphia, head of Ukrainian Catholics in the US; Bishop Włodzimierz Juszczak of the Eparchy of Wrocław-Koszalin in Poland; Bishop Bohdan Dzyurakh, apostolic exarch in Germany and Scandinavia; and Bishop Josaphat Moshchych of Chernivtsi.

The bishops said they wished “to reflect not upon the Pope’s statement but upon the point of view of the victims of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” since “it is important to understand the position of Ukrainians.

“Ukrainians cannot surrender because surrender means death,” said the bishops. “The intentions of Putin and Russia are clear and explicit.”

“In Putin’s mind, there is no such thing as Ukraine, Ukrainian history, language, and independent Ukrainian Church life,” the bishops said. “All matters Ukrainian are ideological constructs, fit to be eradicated. Ukraine (for Putin and Russia) is not a reality but a mere ‘ideology.’

“The ideology of Ukrainian identity, according to Putin, is ‘Nazi,’” said the bishops. “By calling all Ukrainians (who refuse to be Russians and accept Russian

rule) ‘Nazis,’ Putin dehumanises them ... (as having) no right to exist. They need to be annihilated, killed.”

The bishops pointed to sites of mass atrocities by Russian forces in Ukraine, such as “Bucha, Irpin, Borodianka, Izium, and ... other places occupied by Russian forces,” as evidence of “the clear purpose of this war: to eliminate Ukraine and Ukrainians.”

Religious persecution has accompanied Russian brutality in Ukraine, the bishops stressed.

“Every Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory leads to the eradication of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, any independent Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and to the suppression of other religions and all institutions and cultural expressions that do not support Russian hegemony,” they said.

Asked in the RSI interview about his willingness to act as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine war, the pope said, “I am here, period,” and referenced a letter he sent to Israeli Jews at the start of February in which he encouraged them to not succumb to defeatism and mistrust, but to “never lose hope for a possible peace.”

Ukraine Ambassador to the Holy See Andrii Yurash told reporters that “we can see absolutely perfectly that Russia in reality doesn’t want to initiate real negotiation,” but instead seeks an “ultimatum” that is a “strict demand to legitimise a war that we have now” – one that would swallow “the occupied territories and even much more” while changing Ukraine in ways that are “absolutely unacceptable.”

“To accept Russian pre-conditions of this negotiation means to eliminate and to agree that Ukraine will disappear from the real political map of the world,” making it like “Belarus, which is not really an independent country,” said Yurash.

Russia’s war on Ukraine is “an example of ... contemporary genocide” realised against a “concrete territory, concrete country ... concrete nation,” Yurash said.

The Vatican has repeatedly offered to act as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, and last year Pope Francis sent his peace envoy for Ukraine, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, to Kyiv, Moscow, Washington and Beijing to meet with foreign leaders and advance peace talks on Ukraine.

New mass Nigerian kidnap has echoes of Chibok girls in 2014

Tonny Onyuelo,

A spate of kidnappings in Nigeria, including almost 300 schoolchildren taken on 7th March in Kuriga, have left Christians speechless in the face of senseless violence.

As kidnappings become a horrific new normal in Nigeria, Church leaders have strongly urged the government to act.

Gunmen raided a government primary school in broad daylight last week and kidnapped at least 287 pupils – the biggest mass abduction from a school in a decade.

The incident was the second mass kidnapping in less than a week.

“This is heartbreaking to all of us, and it’s now time for the authorities to act fast to stop the killings and abductions,” said Emmanuel Ayeni Nwogu, catechist from the Archdiocese of Kaduna, where the biggest abduction happened. “We continue to pray for the children who have been kidnapped, and we hope they are still alive and under the mighty hand of God.”

Malala Yousafzai, 2014 Nobel Peace prize winner shot in 2012 for fighting for the rights of girls in Afghanistan to be educated, condemned the kidnapping of more than 200 students in Nigeria.

“No child should endure the horror and trauma of being forcibly abducted from their schools,” she wrote on X. “Children around the world – from Nigeria to Gaza to Afghanistan – must be able to access school safely and freely. I urgently call on all relevant authorities to facilitate a safe return for all those abducted in Kaduna State and I stand with their grieving families in these trying times.”

The abduction of the children, led



to a nearby forest at gunpoint, came 10 years after the Boko Haram terrorist group abduction of 276 schoolgirls from their dormitory in Chibok – an incident that caused international outrage. Shockingly, 98 of the victims are still missing.

More than 3,600 people were reported abducted in Nigeria in 2023 – the highest number in five years, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. This number includes several priests.

Nwogu said the terrorists’ actions have led to hundreds of churches remaining close in northern Nigeria.

Instead, many of the terror groups are abducting children and teachers, and conspiring to introduce a restrictive Islamic Sharia law

in the region.

“The gunmen mostly kidnap and kill Christians and their leaders,” the lay leader explained, noting that people who are being killed after the kidnapping are mostly Christians. “The gunmen could abduct anyone, whether they are Christian or Muslim, but when it comes to killings, they will only kill Christians. For Muslims, the gunmen will ask for ransom or use hostages as recruits for fighters.”

Nigeria has struggled with internal security since the arrival, in 2009, of the Boko Haram terror group. Violence intensified from 2011 when Fulani herders joined Boko Haram to escalate the attacks in northern and central Nigeria,

targeting Christians.

The Intersociety advocacy group in Nigeria has said over 100,000 unarmed and defenceless citizens have died directly or indirectly outside the law in the hands of security forces in the past eight years, between August 2014 and December 2023.

“The Government must take action to save the Christian population that radical Islamists are reducing,” warned Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of Makurdi. “The kidnappings, killings and destroying churches we are experiencing every day are aimed at finishing Christians,” he added.

Bishop Anagbe urged the authorities to protect the Christian population, churches and schools. While praying for the students who were abducted and those who have been kidnapped before, Bishop Anagbe said his diocese has experienced numerous attacks from Fulani militants.

“We are worried that despite such killings and kidnappings, the government has never arrested anyone,” he said. “As a Church, we now demand that the government act.”

Archbishop Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji of Owerri, president of Nigerian bishops’ conference, accused the government of abandoning its people in a time of need, and warned that the country was on the verge of disorder and lawlessness following the numerous terror attacks that the government had failed to stop.

“The government has failed to plug the many loopholes in the system,” Archbishop Ugorji from Abuja. “They have remained non-proactive and ineffective in checking the senseless bloodshed.”

In Brief

Top Canadian judge to investigate Lacroix

Pope Francis has asked a retired Quebec judge to conduct an investigation “into the facts, circumstances and imputability of (an) alleged offence” targeting Cardinal Gérald C. Lacroix.

Judge André Denis is tasked with investigating whether acts of a sexual nature were committed by the Archbishop of Quebec before he was ordained a priest.

The pope said the allegation against Cardinal Lacroix was brought to his attention in January.

However, Denis told the *Présence* news agency that he began work on 8th February and aims to “present my conclusions to the pope as quickly as possible.”

He said he would offer no further comment until the investigation’s conclusion.

Judge Denis was the first judge in Canada to preside over a trial under the Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Act.

Slovakian bishops apologise to victims

Catholic bishops in Slovakia have apologised to victims after publishing their first report on sexual abuse, while cautioning that much more must be done to tackle the problem in the local Church. “We are aware the number of victims is certainly much higher. Therefore, we humbly admit we have not always taken an active stance in solving abuse crimes,” said Archbishop Bernard Bober of Košice, chairman of the 17-member conference.

“We sincerely apologise for the unpreparedness, carelessness or non-acceptance we as bishops may have shown.”

The archbishop’s statement came as the bishops’ Commission on the Protection of Minors, established in 2018, published its first evaluation report, listing accusations against clergy and Church staff over three decades.

Slovak’s Church had “strived for transparency and truthfulness,” but had still done “very little” in attempting to achieve the “zero tolerance” demanded by the pope and create a “safe environment for children.”

The 35-page report said 68 complaints had been received against Church personnel since 1990, most over the past eight years, of which 39 had been confirmed with 17 still under investigation. 44 minors had been listed as abuse victims, and 31 cases had involved diocesan priests and five religious order clergy.

Cardinal proclaims innocence after abuse inquiry opens

The Church has opened an inquiry into a “distressing” allegation of an historical offence against New Zealand’s Cardinal John Dew, the retired Archbishop of Wellington, after a police investigation closed without any charges filed.

Cardinal Dew, 75, has strenuously denied the allegation but has been suspended from ministry while the *Vox Estis Lux Mundi* investigation takes place.

He is accused of an instance of sexual abuse against a minor during his time as an assistant priest during the 1970s. New Zealand police spent 10 months looking into the inquiry before determining the claim was unsubstantiated.

In a statement Cardinal Dew said he was informed of the allegation on 6th May, 2023, the day after the

pope accepted his resignation and he retired, and he immediately stepped aside from ministry.

“I stated immediately, and state again now, that there have never been any instances of improper or abusive behavior in my 48 years of priesthood,” he said.

The complaint was lodged with the Church’s National Office for Professional Standards and the country’s Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

“In accord with our protocols, Cardinal John stood aside from all public church activities when the allegation was brought to the attention of the Church,” Wellington’s current Archbishop Paul Martin, said in an open letter to the archdiocese. “Cardinal John has asserted his innocence throughout.”

Hungarians defend Church as Government members resign

Prominent Hungarian Catholics have defended their Church’s record on tackling sexual crimes by clergy after a Government abuse scandal led to the appointment of a new national president of the country.

“Our Church is doing a lot in this area – with a centralised system from the Vatican, careful handling of reports, and full cooperation with the investigating authorities according to canonical and local standards,” said Péter Zachar, co-president of the ecumenical Association of Christian Intellectuals, or KÉSZ.

The lay Catholic made his comments as Tamás Sulyok, Hungary’s Constitutional Court chairman, assumed office as President after being elected by members of

parliament to replace Katalin Novák, who resigned for pardoning a man convicted in a child abuse case.

Hungary’s former justice minister, Judit Varga, who endorsed the pardon, also stepped down shortly after he was tasked with leading Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party European Parliament election campaign.

The head of Hungary’s Calvinist Reformed Church, Bishop Zoltán Balog also quit after being implicated in the scandal, but accused opposition politicians of staging a “political witch hunt.”

Local media claimed Novák used the pope’s visit to Hungary in April 2023 as a pretext for the pardon, a claim denied by the Hungarian bishops’ press office.

Archbishop refuses to quit the streets as crime gangs run riot in Haiti

Haiti's Prime Minister Ariel Henry has agreed to resign following weeks of mounting pressure and increasing violence in the impoverished country.

His decision to step down came as the country's senior cleric, Archbishop Max Leroy Mésidor of Port-au-Prince, admitted the country was not just on the brink of civil war, "you could say it has already started."

Criminal gangs now "run the streets" he said.

"Yes, there is a real danger of civil war breaking out in the country. The armed gangs act like an organised army. They are very well equipped and very well armed. The police cannot keep up with them," Mésidor told Aid to the Church in Need in an interview.

In some regions "groups of citizens try to stand up to the gangs. So there are often clashes between these groups and the gangs, and also between the police and the gangs."

"We are in a low-intensity civil war."

"There are no safe areas" since "gangs operate almost everywhere, making it extremely difficult to move, especially outside the capital."

Church buildings have been attacked and a number of clergy and religious kidnapped. Already in 2024, six nuns were taken in January, another six nuns and one priest in February, and a further priest at the start of March.

The threat of kidnapping "is spreading like a plague. It's really very difficult... daily life consists of suffering, violence, gunfights,

The streets of Haiti are now a no-go zone, with gangs acting with impunity



poverty, and deprivation. I cannot visit two-thirds of my diocese because the roads are blocked.

"I have been shot at in my office; our cathedral has been hit by bullets."

But he vowed to fight on: "The Church will not abandon its brothers and sisters."

The people are living their faith in these circumstances and despite these circumstances. "Even if there is gunfire in the neighbourhood the night before, the next day, even at 6 o'clock in the morning, the church is full. There are people who go and visit the sick, in spite of the danger."

"We try to rekindle their hope, to get them to organise themselves and not sink into resignation," he

said. "Whenever possible, the Church continues its mission. But it's not easy. The motto is: 'One day at a time.'"

Mr Henry's decision to step down could prove crucial in calming the chaos. In a video message from Puerto Rico, where he was left stranded after streets gangs refused permission for his plane to land at Port-au-Prince airport on its return from talks in Kenya over the deployment of an international security force, he said his Government would resign "immediately after the installation of [a transition] council."

"I'm asking all Haitians to remain calm and do everything they can for peace and stability to

come back as fast as possible."

Mr Henry has led the country on an interim basis since July 2021 following the assassination of former President Jovenel Moïse. But he has angered opponents by repeatedly postponing elections, saying security must be restored first.

Many Haitians had questioned him governing the country for this long without an elected president.

Heavily armed criminal gangs have tightened their grip on the streets of the capital Port-au-Prince, and recently attacked the main prison, freeing thousands of inmates.

Matthias Pierre, a former elections minister in Haiti, said the

Criminal gangs now run the streets ... there is a real danger of civil war breaking out ... there are often clashes between the police and the gangs ... we are in a low-intensity civil war"

situation in the country was "very precarious".

"The police force is weak, and more than 40 police stations [are] destroyed. The army is very limited and not equipped; gang members occupy most of the [Port-au-Prince] downtown and some government headquarters.

"Very soon people will be out of food, medication and... medical support."

Mr Pierre said the gangs were now pushing to be part of any new power-sharing deal, adding that such a political settlement was impossible without the "support" of an international armed force.

Mr Henry has asked for an international security force to be deployed to tackle the gangs. His stepping down was believed to be a request from the USA, which said his removal from office would pave the way for a Kenyan-led security force.

The Caricom group of Caribbean nations had made it clear that he was seen as an impediment to Haiti's stability and that he would have to stand down so the move to a transitional council could begin.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has committed \$300m to the 1,000-strong Kenya-led security force, as well as \$33m in humanitarian aid.

Chairman of the Caricom group, Guyana President Irfaan Ali said: "We acknowledge his resignation upon the establishment of a transitional presidential council and naming of an interim prime minister."

President Ali said the transitional presidential council would have two observers and seven voting members, including representatives from several coalitions, the private sector and civil society, and one religious leader.

The council has been mandated to "swiftly" appoint an interim prime minister, he said, adding that anyone intending to run in Haiti's next elections will not be able to participate.

It is hoped the council will pave the way for the first elections in Haiti since 2016.



Mexico's Church unites rivals to sign unique peace pledge for troubled nation

David Agren

The Mexican Catholic bishops' conference has organised a unique ceremony that brought the three main candidates for this year's presidential elections under one roof to sign a pledge to bring peace to the troubled country.

The Church campaign – backed by the Society of Jesus and the Conference of Major Superiors of Religious of Mexico – brought the three presidential candidates together on 11th March to sign a National Agenda for Peace – described as a roadmap for pacifying Mexico and the starting point for dialogue with the next Government.

The document outlines the dire situation in Mexico, where more than 30,000 people have been murdered in each of the past six years. Another 90,000 have been disappeared during many years of violence and drug cartels' disputes over territory.

"We have been overwhelmed by the violence that has not stopped growing in the last 18 years," said Jesuit Father Jorge Atilano, director of the National Dialogue for Peace, a series of forums around the country, which formed the National Peace Agenda.

"The people that we are already losing day by day, the 90 (people) murdered, the 20 disappeared, the ones who pay protection money, those who are extorted and those who have had to migrate or move, they are the ones who have brought us here," he said.

Election front-runner Claudia Sheinbaum of the ruling Morena party, however, disagreed with parts of the plan, telling an audience of religious leaders, civil society, victims of violence, diplomats and experts: "I don't share the pessimistic evaluation of the present moment" outlined in the document.

She signed the document, but with the addendum, "Let's continue talking."

But responding to comments of Sheinbaum on the bishops' document, her main rival, Xóchitl Gálvez, the representative candidate of a three-party coalition, criticised her rival, saying what Sheinbaum "did today" before the bishops' conference "was disrespectful, but above all, it is an act of arrogance when you do not recognise the insecurity in the country."

"You lie about the violence figures, you lie when you say you are an environmentalist, and you lie when you use Pope Francis' words of fraternity," she said, blasting her rival. "Where do you live, Disneyland?" Gálvez asked.



Mexico's presidential opposition hopeful Xóchitl Gálvez and Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera López of Monterrey are applauded as they attend an event in Mexico City to sign a peace commitment organised by members of the Catholic Church. Photo: Raquel Cunha, Reuters

Mexico goes to the polls on 2nd June in an unprecedented election as women lead the two main political coalitions, meaning the country is likely to choose its first female president. But campaigns are unfolding amid deep political divisions, concerns over democratic backsliding and political violence – with drug cartels killing candidates with impunity.

The Mexican bishops' conference has urged voter participation, but expressed concern over democracy, the rule of law and criminal groups intervening in the electoral process.

"We believe that the worst-case scenario, the one that we must avoid, is organised crime and other criminal groups intervening in the electoral process, anywhere and at any time," the bishops said.

"Electoral democracy mixed with criminal groups is totally

unacceptable. It's a sign of the most deplorable corruption that must be avoided at all costs."

The statement followed news that bishops in the southern state of Guerrero intervened as mediators in a dispute between warring drug cartels in an attempt to pacify an area rife with crimes such as extortion.

"The message that emerges from their initiatives for peace is that the state has lost control of the problem and that (the bishops) need to intervene with other social actors to negotiate a common agenda," Pablo Mijangos González, a historian of Mexican Catholicism at Southern Methodist University said.

Current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has never publicly criticised drug cartels, has disputed any

suggestions the state has lost control of its territory. He also points to the murder rate falling 20 per cent during his five years in office under a security policy known as "hugs, not bullets." But the president has repeatedly downplayed atrocities and refused to meet victims of violence – while notoriously greeting the mother of convicted drug cartel boss Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán.

Sheinbaum, a former Mexico City mayor and López Obrador protégé, expressed differences with the National Agenda for Peace, including its sections on removing the military from public security tasks. She also disagreed with assertions that crime statistics were fudged, the social fabric was fraying, and the document's vision that "fear, powerlessness and distrust and uncertainty are

prevalent" in Mexico.

Gálvez blasted the idea of "militarized" public security, saying, "Give unto civilians that which is civilian and to the military that which is military."

She also walked back plans for building a mega-prison, saying she wanted prisons to be "true social rehabilitation centres, not crime schools."

The third person to sign the document was Jorge Álvarez Máynez, the candidate for the small Citizen Movement party. "The only difference between 2018 and 2024 is that the horror has increased," he said, referring to the last election year.

The Mexican bishops' conference has not traditionally spoken out loudly on issues of violence, preferring not to anger local politicians or put priests working in conflict areas in danger

But the June 2022 murders of Jesuit Fathers Joaquín Mora and Javier Campos in their parish in Chihuahua state proved "a turning point," according to conference president Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera López of Monterrey.

The murders also prompted the National Dialogue for Peace, which provided space for dozens of Mexicans from all walks of life to discuss ideas for pacifying the country.

"It's a more prophetic voice and much, much, much more committed," Jesuit Father Javier Avila, who famously called for the president to change security policy at Fathers Mora and Campos' funeral Mass, said of the bishops' recent statements.

"There's no longer the terror of speaking."

Clergymen pass by a painting of Mexican Jesuits Father Javier Campos Morales and Father Joaquín César Mora Salazar at the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City June 18, 2023, on the first anniversary of their assassination. Photo: Raquel Cunha, Reuters



Polish diocesan phase closes in cause of Catholic midwife who delivered thousands of babies at Auschwitz

Filip Mazurczak

It is believed that Stanisława Leszczynska, a Polish midwife imprisoned at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Nazi Germany-occupied Poland, delivered 3,000 babies of different nationalities and treated them and their mothers with heroic humanity during her time in the camp.

As Poland commemorated the 50th anniversary of her death on 11th March, the diocesan phase of her sainthood cause came to a close.

“The laity, ordinary and not ordinary, can be the best personal role models for all of us,” Cardinal Grzegorz Rys of Łódź told Polish weekly *Gosc Niedzielny* (*Sunday Visitor*) prior to celebrating Mass to finalize the first local stage in the cause of the fearless wartime midwife.

Stanisława was born in 1896 to Jan and Henryka Zambrzycki in Łódź in the Russian partition of Poland. The family was working class in a city known as the ‘Polish Manchester,’ because of the textile industry that flourished there, like in its English namesake.

In 1916 Stanisława married Bronisław Leszczynski, who was a printer. Their first son, named Bronisław after his father, was born prematurely in 1917. His miraculous survival made the young mother wonder whether she might be able to serve women and babies in similar circumstances.

She already had two children when she began midwifery school. “This academic endeavour required her to leave her children behind for two years while she attended school in Warsaw – a rather shocking choice in Poland in 1920,” *Church Life Journal* wrote in an article on her life in 2023. “After graduating with honours, Stanisława knelt in a church and consecrated her work as a midwife to the Blessed Mother, vowing that if ever she lost a baby she would give up midwifery.”

On 1st September 1939, the bloodiest war in human history began as Germany invaded Poland from the West; the Soviet Union would follow suit from the East 16 days later. Łódź, renamed Litzmannstadt by the occupying Germans, was among the regions of western Poland that were directly annexed to the Third Reich, or Realm; its Polish and Jewish populations were expelled from their homes to make way for German colonisers.

In Litzmannstadt, the Jews were confined to a ghetto and later



destined for annihilation in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Non-Jewish Poles, meanwhile, were to become slaves for the Aryan ‘master race.’ In addition to deportations, members of the Polish intelligentsia and resistance were shot in mass executions in forests outside Łódź.

The war was a tragedy for Leszczynska’s family. Though as Catholics they were spared the worst of the depravity reserved for Poland’s Jews, they still suffered cruelly. They were expelled from their home, which became part of the ghetto.

But after helping Jews escape

from the ghetto and giving them food, Leszczynska and her daughter, Sylwia, were arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau for imprisonment. Her sons Henryk and Stanisław were deported to the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in Austria for their resistance activity. Leszczynska’s husband, Bronisław, managed to flee to Warsaw, where he would be killed during the Warsaw uprising in 1944. Their eldest son also managed to escape the arrest and survived the war.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1.1

million people were murdered in the genocidal complex of Auschwitz-Birkenau during the fewer than five years of its existence: 960,000 Jews, 74,000 non-Jewish Poles, 21,000 Roma, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war and 10,000-15,000 prisoners of other nationalities.

Killings took place through mass shootings and gassings. Furthermore, many inmates who were not immediately murdered died from overwork, starvation or diseases such as cholera and typhus that flourished amid the camp’s appalling sanitary conditions.

In this inferno, Leszczynska succeeded in not only maintaining her decency but brought hope to many inmates. As an experienced midwife, Leszczynska persuaded camp authorities in letting her deliver babies in Auschwitz-Birkenau’s infirmary. According to her own count, Leszczynska delivered 3,000 babies.

“Although some have been sceptical about this number, it was

based on her calculations,” Maria Stachurska, Leszczynska’s grand-niece and a filmmaker who has directed a documentary and is now co-writing the script for a drama film about her relative.

“Every day, she had to give a report on the number of births she delivered to her superiors, so it was easy to extrapolate the total,” Stachurska said.

Among all the babies Leszczynska delivered, not one child died during birth and not a single mother died of a postpartum infection. Her German superiors were shocked.

“One day the Lagerarzt (camp doctor) told me to present a report on the postpartum infections and mortality rate for the mothers and newborns,” Leszczynska wrote in her 1957 account. “I told him that I had not had a single death of a mother or newborn. He looked at me in disbelief and said that even the best German university hospitals could not boast of such a success rate. In his eyes I could see anger and hatred.”

Leszczynska comforted the mothers and newborns, singing and praying with them. Although they were of a different faith, Jewish mothers did not mind praying with Leszczynska.

But while this sounds like a story of hope, the reality for Leszczynska’s babies was hideously cruel. Until 1943, all children born in Auschwitz-Birkenau were immediately killed by drowning in a barrel. From 1943, only Jewish children were murdered; meanwhile, other newborns were subjected to medical experiments or, if they had Nordic features, like blond hair and blue eyes, they would be stolen from their mothers and sent to German families. While she was instructed to kill Jewish babies, Leszczynska refused. Remarkably, she was never disciplined for not following this order.

“No, never, children cannot be killed,” she reportedly told the notorious Josef Mengele, the camp’s cruel medic, who was her immediate superior.

Tragically, just 30 of the 3,000 children brought into the world by Leszczynska survived to the end of the war. In addition to being drowned or killed by pseudo-medical experiments, other children simply starved to death; due to the starvation-level rations of Auschwitz-Birkenau, many mothers were incapable of producing milk for their infants.

“Among all the babies Leszczynska delivered, not one child died during birth and not a single mother died of a postpartum infection. Her German superiors were shocked.... even the best German university hospitals could not boast of such a success rate...”



“Everyone has heard of Josef Mengele, but few know of Stanislaw Leszczynska. Even in Poland she’s not as well-known as she should be,” Stachurska said. “We should stop looking at the war through a crooked mirror and remember not just the war criminals but above all the heroes, the champions of humanity.”

Stachurska was 16 when her aunt died in 1974. She remembers her as a very pious woman filled with Christian charity.

“I saw her pray the rosary every day. She demanded much of others and much of herself and had a disciplined prayer life,” she said. “Today, there is a lot of hate and gossip in the public sphere. When we disagree with someone, we tend to accuse them of the worst things. My great-aunt was nothing like that. After the war, she refused to talk about her time in Auschwitz-Birkenau to avoid spreading hatred towards the German people.”

In the early 1990s, the Catholic

Church formally launched Leszczynska’s sainthood cause, giving her the title ‘Servant of God.’

During a showing of her documentary in Barcelona, Spain, in 2023, Stachurska learned from the Israeli consul present at the event that Israeli authorities have initiated a petition to give Leszczynska the medal of Righteous Among the Nations, an honorific title for non-Jewish individuals granted by Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial, for risking their lives to aid Jews during the Holocaust.

“She loved her professional work very much and delighted in every newborn baby. She told us about the babies with a smile,” noted her daughter, Sylwia.

All her own children survived the horrors of World War II. A few years before her passing, Leszczynska reunited with mothers and babies she helped in the camp. One of her patients described her as an “angel of kindness.”



“I saw her pray the rosary every day. She demanded much of others and much of herself and had a disciplined prayer life ... after the war, she refused to talk about her time in Auschwitz to avoid spreading hatred towards the Germans...”

Embrace the Eucharistic dynamic: change the world

David Spesia

Jesus’ entire existence was Eucharistic. If you and I are going to live as his disciples and respond wholeheartedly to the gift of his grace, our lives need to be marked by a Eucharistic dynamic.

This Eucharistic dynamic is as simple as it is profound. It emerges most clearly on the night before Our Lord enters into his passion, but it marks Jesus’ whole life, death and resurrection. In a catechesis on the Road to Emmaus, Pope Francis observes that: “[Jesus] repeats for the disciples the fundamental gesture of every Eucharist. He takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it. Does not Jesus’ entire history perhaps lie in this series of gestures? And is there not in every Eucharist, also the symbol of what the Church should be? Jesus takes us, blesses us, ‘breaks’ our life -- because there is no love without sacrifice -- and offers it to others; he offers it to everyone” (General Audience, May 24, 2017).

Jesus received every day of his earthly life as a gift from the Father and raised it up in blessing; then he allowed himself to be broken open and given away for others. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus takes who and what is before him, blesses them as they are, breaks them open to a new experience of the kingdom of God which is at hand, and then offers the fruit of this encounter back to the Father in and through the Spirit.

Jesus wants us to enter into this dynamic and dramatic love story.



He deeply desires that we offer him our very selves – our sometimes put-together but often messy selves, our broken and yet repaired, limping and yet loving selves. He wants to take and bless all of it, and then break it open so that we might be able to make our own sacrificial offering for others – giving away what we have received.

This might all sound nice in the abstract, but here’s a concrete way that it would change the world: Let’s ask Jesus to take that one person or situation that poses the greatest challenge for us right now into his holy hands. Let’s dare to let Jesus bless that person or situation (yes, that one). Let’s invite Jesus to break open our hearts to offer some prayer or some penance, some

gesture or some grace, for that person or that situation. And then let’s watch Jesus deliver light and new life where it seems like there is only darkness and even death.

Jesus wants to change the world. Jesus wants to transform all those relationships and situations which cause us pain, and he waits for us to invite him into this redemptive work. Jesus wants us to know that we are infinitely loved, and he waits for us to embrace the fact that “there is no love without sacrifice.” Our Lord longs to empower us to embrace this Eucharistic dynamic through the bread which he gives – his flesh for the life of the world (Jn 6:51).

Jesus, loving in the Eucharist, come and love in us!

The ultimate act of forgiveness

Stephen Clark

I wondered what those who knew me in my youth would find more unlikely: that I would ever write about forgiving enemies, or that Hannibal Lector would pen a vegetarian cookbook... definitely the former.

I want to share the deepest insight I have heard on the subject of forgiveness. It was described by Fr Blount, a charismatic American exorcist whose testimonies keep you on the edge of your seat. He described what he received from God on the topic of forgiving enemies. The process at first seemed familiar, the decision or act of one’s will regardless of feeling forgiving.

The next step he described was to ask God to bless your enemy, not grudgingly but lavishly and sincerely with joy in life; and then added that we should pray that they become saints; and also that they are given a higher degree of glory than us in Heaven. How God

accomplishes this is to be left up to Him.

The next step though was a much deeper cut. To thank God for whatever happened to you. In his own family story, Fr Blount had one sister who had been raped, an uncle and cousin shot and murdered and more than a few hard experiences in his own life. And yet this step is essential, without exception.

The reason given was that whatever wounds we have taken in life from the evil one, or his allies or those around us, have been permitted by God; his permissive will. That is not to say that he approves of any evil thing as that would be impossible as He is entirely good and holy. More than that, the angels of God protect us from the arrows of evil (more than we know) but sometimes, He instructs them to let one through, to allow us to be wounded, sometimes severely.

This is not to give the enemy of our soul a victory, by no means, but

rather, whatever wound we take will flatten us, humble us, cause us to cry out, but will also bring about a change in line with His purposes eventually. And so if a particular wound leads to our sanctification or salvation, would that not be reason to rejoice over it and thank God for transforming what was intended to destroy us, into a gain?

It is the hard things in life that produce the most growth.

Often our sufferings at the hands of others can be misinterpreted as God’s seemingly lack of intervention. He risks the fact that we can be angry, resentful and even hate Him for allowing such things, or doubt His goodness as a consequence, in order to complete His work in us in the longer run. He has the big picture, our eternal good in mind.

And if you can make it this far, only one thing remains: to surrender it all to God and receive His healing of our wounded heart.

JOURNEY IN FAITH

CHRIS MCDONNELL



A change in the season is upon us

It was a grey morning, dawn had just broken. I pressed the switch for the bedroom light. Nothing happened. The greyness remained. So rather than read a book, I drifted back to sleep. The trip-out of the electricity supply could wait a while.

A trivial thing, to be without light in the small hours, inconvenient yes, but a very different proposition when power is lost in a whole neighborhood or city for several days or weeks at a time.

That has been the pattern across the southeastern sector of Ukraine and the cramped, overcrowded Gaza strip in the eastern Mediterranean. After continual bombardment much that was recognisable is now no more than pile upon pile of disconnected rubble. Cityscapes changed beyond description, inhabited by homeless families, waiting, their lives changed.

The kitchen has been replaced by the street lines of hungry men, women and wide-eyed children, huddled expectantly, with empty bowls, for food. Their experience of change has been radical and rapid



with no clear end point in sight.

Each year we experience change through the passing of the seasons, both climatical and liturgical. Now

with Springtime here in the northern hemisphere, we hope for brighter, warmer days, days of growth in our fields. At the same

time, we walk the pathway of the season of Lent, looking for the reality of growth in our lives.

I wrote these few lines last week.

*A change of season
The chill, dark soil of winter
eases the season change
over the folded hills of March.*

*Damp, stained shoes from a walk
through frost-flaked grass
till, on reaching the farm gate,*

*the sprung metal catch anchors
bare fingers, swings open, then
clatters closed behind, rattling.*

*Flowers are breaking through
ahead of time, offering purple
yellow and white amid green.*

*Gather time in cupped hands
guard it as a nest for later rest
when evening comes close.*

*Then settle down with memories,
Of people, places and events
Close your hands round dreams.*

May this Lent bring to each one of us a cared-for change, nurturing all that leads us to God, clearing the land for new growth and strength in the days ahead as we approach the paschal feast of Resurrection.

BOOK REVIEW

New book lifts lid on three popes' bid to reform Vatican

'In the Courts of Three Popes'
Mary Ann Glendon

Mike Mastromatteo

Mary Ann Glendon's new book is a welcome addition to the body of narrative non-fiction on the inner-workings of influential but only dimly understood institutions.

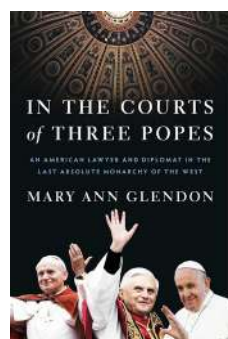
In the Courts of the Three Popes is a memoir-like examination of Vatican operations, both diplomatic and administrative, from a front-line observer.

Subtitled *An American Lawyer and Diplomat in the Last Absolute Monarchy of the West*, Glendon's book offers keen insights into how the last three pontiffs handled the more temporal side of Church affairs.

Mary Ann Glendon was US Ambassador to the Holy See from November 2007 until early 2009. Although it was but a one-year term, Glendon was already well acquainted with Vatican operations from her previous work as a Holy See representative to the 1995 UN International Conference on Women in Beijing. She also served as president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences from 2004 to 2013.

Don't look for exposés or insider gossip within these pages. Instead, Glendon's book is a dispassionate discourse on her path to the ambassadorship and on the importance of diplomacy in the Holy See's interaction with governments and cultures the world over.

Glendon is effusive in her admiration for



St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI for the theological and spiritual underpinnings that marked their leadership of the universal Catholic Church. What these popes lacked, she observes with sympathy, was an administrative élan that would have greatly assisted long overdue curial reforms.

As the author notes midway through the story, *'In terms of the traditional image of the Church as Mater et Magistra, mother and teacher, one might say that when Pope Benedict resigned in 2013, the Vatican was well supplied with doctrinal guidance but in dire need of someone who would take charge of the household.'*

Glendon expands on the question of administrative efficiency of the Vatican in her discussion of the Pope Francis pontificate. Although Glendon's term ended four years before Francis's papacy, she kept tabs on his work through her role as a supervisor at the

Institute for the Works of Religion (Vatican Bank) from 2013-2018.

Glendon applauds his efforts to streamline and improve the Vatican's administrative and diplomatic efforts but warns against the temptation to bring corporate management techniques into the fray. She also notes that as the Church looks to lend its spiritual and moral authority to international relations and policymaking, it should not succumb to charges that it exists only as lobbyist or as just "another NGO."

Glendon's book is most effective in discussing the laity's role in supporting the Church's administrative affairs. She makes effective reference to the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on lay men and women – not the clergy – to imbue political, economic and social institutions with Christian principles. From that viewpoint, Glendon suggests that while lay Catholics have started exerting more influence within the Curia, there is still room for improvement.

'As is apparent,' Glendon writes, 'Holy See officials, whose training has done little to prepare them for administering a sovereign state in the 21st century, could certainly benefit from expert lay assistance in many areas. One might even imagine that increased complementarity with laypersons would help to improve morale within the curia.'

Some of her sharpest criticism centres on the Vatican's treatment of lay staff, however. She notes a reluctance of some long-term

Curia workers to welcome and accept lay input, especially, it seems, from women. Even Pope Francis, for all his reforming zeal, seems to come up short in this area.

'One simple way to begin changing curial culture would be to assure rank-and-file personnel of working conditions in which they can flourish and reach their potential,' Glendon writes. 'That would be a major step toward.'

Overcoming 'demeaning attitudes and behaviour' toward women religious and laywomen, who constitute nearly one-quarter of the Vatican workforce, would also help improve worker morale and, presumably, improve overall operations Curia-wide.

Glendon asserts that the Curia still has a long way to go to realise Pope John Paul II's vision of 'complementarity' between clergy and laity, and between men and women. 'Over a quarter-century has passed since [Pope John Paul II's] 1995 exhortation to "all men in the Church to undergo, where necessary, a change of heart and to implement as a demand of their faith, a positive vision of women".'

Despite these observations however, Glendon remains optimistic that the Vatican can improve its corporate culture and allow lay, religious and ordained staff to bring their talents, enthusiasm and inspiration to the service of the Church, stressing that for all its foibles, "no-one should shy away from service to the Church."

A VIEW FROM THE PEWS

MICHAEL CAINE
ST WINEFRIDE'S PARISH, LYMM, CHESHIRE

The ordination of 15 Seminarians to the Diaconate at Maynooth College.

The path to the pope starts as a priest

In the UK, one of the noticeable facts relating to the Catholic Church at the moment is the lack of priests.

Social media and the news on TV and the radio are all bombarding us with anything but the beauty and peace of religious understanding. In the past, men had the time and inclination to consider what becoming a priest involved. Today, how many of us know what is required? For those who don't know, the following is a simple explanation.

The calling to be a priest all started when Jesus was asked what his mission here on Earth was.

He replied in various ways that he'd come to **save sinners**. His main message for us to achieve this was to:

love God and our neighbours.

To help him pass on this message, he gathered followers called disciples, and we call the 12 main ones his 'apostles'. He showed and told them how to teach others various ways to love God and their neighbours and created a Church, making the Apostle Peter its head, the first pope. He also gave these

original disciples special powers, but it is the following three that we will be looking at:

Reconciliation - to absolve a person's sins or not, promising that God will then forgive such sins or not.

Holy Eucharist - Change bread and water into the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Holy Orders - The power to pass on these powers to others.

Since the time of Jesus, men have been chosen by God to be his disciples and the original disciples gave the new ones special powers, including the above.

Today we call this passing on of the powers to a new disciple 'ordination', and new ordained disciples are called priests, but what is the process a man goes through to become a priest?

I thought I knew but I was wrong. I'd always thought that any young man who wanted to be a priest applied at a seminary where his training began. How wrong I was. The reality is that a man must believe God is calling him to do such work for him.

If a man continues to believe this, he contacts either directly or through his parish priest, the person responsible for religious vocations within the diocese, sometimes called a vocations director. It is he who is responsible for determining if the applicant's call is real.

A man's calling must be determined with the help of the Church.

The process can take up to two years before a candidate can enter a seminary and begin his training, with everyone involved doing their best to ensure the calling is real. Another thing I never knew was that:

It is the bishop who makes the final approval about a man's suitability to start the process of formation, that is becoming a priest.

The process can take up to seven years. It involves not only study and skills development but also a deepening of discipleship.

After around two years of successful training, the bishop will ordain the man to be a deacon.

Only a bishop has the power to ordain.

A deacon has the power to baptise and marry couples but has none of the above three 'powers' or special duties. If he wants to permanently stay as a deacon, he can also take a job outside the Church, marry, and have a family.

If the man wants to carry on his training and become a priest, he will be involved in further intense training for about five years, after which the bishop ordains him into the priesthood.

After being ordained a priest, he has the powers to do baptism, Holy Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick and matrimony. He can under very special circumstances also do Confirmation.

If a priest eventually shows special abilities, these are usually made known to the bishop. If it is then thought appropriate, the bishop will submit the priest's name to the Pope who will be responsible for deciding if he should be further ordained as a bishop.

If this is so, the ordination is usually done by three bishops, although it could be done by one under special circumstances. Bishops have all the powers of the

sacraments when they are ordained.

This process of ordination into a deacon, then a priest and finally into a bishop are the only ordinations.

All other levels of the clergy, including being made pope, are by election.

REMEMBER:

Only bishops have the power to ordain men into priests.

Some priests show special wisdom and holiness and are further ordained and become bishops.

Only existing bishops can ordain a priest into a bishop.

The Pope is a bishop. His title is The Bishop of Rome. He is not ordained as a pope; rather he is elected by Cardinals when the previous pope dies.

Cardinals are bishops given a special title by a previous pope.

Bishops are chosen by their fellow bishops to be considered as cardinals. The bishops give their reasons to the pope over his promotion, but it is the pope who makes the final decision.

All bishops, cardinals and the pope himself started out as priests.

Let go and let God take over your life

If you want to be healthy spiritually, morally, and physically, just let go and let God. Let go of the annoyances of everyday life; the irritations and the petty vexations that cross your path daily. Don't take them up, don't nurse them, pet them, or brood over them. Let go of them. They are not worth it.

That undeserved slight you got from someone. Perhaps it wasn't intended, perhaps it was but never mind, let it go. Refuse to let it bother you. Let go of that feeling of anger you have when someone slights you, puts you down, or mocks you. Let it go before it turns from anger into rage, and then into resentment that will tear you up like a cancer inside. If you hold onto anger, it will occupy a space in your mind that will destroy your own peace of mind. Get rid of it for you are better than that.

You are a child of God.

The same applies to jealousy, pride, greed, envy, and malice. Let go of all such urges. Sweep them out of your mind, and you will be surprised what a cleansing and rejuvenating effect it will have upon you. If you continue to indulge negative emotions, you will only hoard them and store them at a deadly risk to your soul. And what about the big troubles? The bitter disappointments, the deep wrongs, and the sorrows and tragedies of life itself. How do you deal with them? Let them fall away, like barren leaves falling from a tree. The Lord allows troubles and tragedies in your life to draw you



closer to Him. These troubles and sufferings are inevitable in your transitory life. They serve a purpose. Let them bear good fruit.

My good friend, Tom, shared his story with me about how difficult it is to let go. He worked as a police officer in London and was confronted with a terrible dilemma. His sergeant didn't like him and made life for him a living hell. Wondering what to do, Tom consulted with an older friend about what he should do. His friend said compassionately, "Tom, you've no idea what's torturing that

sergeant to act like that. You've got to get out from under it."

To which Tom replied, "how do I do that and keep my job?" Well, his friend said, "what time does the sergeant arrive at the station" Without hesitation, Tom said, "eight o' clock in the morning." His friend then advised Tom to arrive around 7:30am; and to prepare a fresh brew of coffee. When the sergeant would enter the station, Tom's friend suggested: "go greet him with a tasty cup of the freshest coffee." Tom thought about it and did exactly what his friend

suggested the very next day. The sergeant gladly took the coffee to his office and, while sipping it contentedly, he kept casting a puzzling glance, now and again, to where Tom was seated in the office. The good news is that the sergeant never bothered Tom after that.

All because Tom was able to let go, and allow his actions to bear good fruit.

It is important also to ask the Lord to satisfy your needs. Then, all those pet peeves you have been nursing inside you and talking about will pass away like melting

snow. Focus on the good news, instead, and it will come to you, flowing over you like water from a shower.

It is not hard once you get used to the habit of focusing on the good news. You will find it easy to get rid of the things that mar and embitter your life, and you will enjoy letting them go. You will find the world a beautiful place. You will find it beautiful because you will be free to enjoy it; free in mind, free in soul and free in body.

The greatest factor in helping us to "let go" is to see with the eye of faith that God permits these daily, indeed hourly, annoyances. If you look at them in the light of the gospel, you shall profit by them in this life and in the life to come. Wise people learn to adjust themselves to this universe over which God rules with infinite wisdom and love.

Thus the first condition of peace of mind is to let go of the annoyances and troubles of each day, and to let God satisfy your needs (Matthew 6 : 34).

If you value peace of mind, focus on the good news.

Let me conclude with the Serenity Prayer that God may grant you the peace of mind that surpasses understanding :

"God grant you the serenity to accept the things you cannot change,
" the courage to change the things you can,
"and the Wisdom to know the difference."

Don't just look for a sign from God – become it for others

Effie Caldarola

As a small child, I was a bit of a religious nerd.

I'm not sure why, but I was the oldest child, the only daughter, and our little Catholic mission parish in farm country was central to our lives. From a young age, faith intrigued me.

Case in point: I remember taking a toy – probably not a treasured stuffed animal, more likely something of my brother's – and placing it behind a chair. Then I would talk to God. If you make this item disappear, I would tell the Almighty, then I will definitely believe in you.

Needless to say, the toy was always safely sitting behind the chair when I looked. I remained a tiny believer, albeit a disappointed one.

I chuckle when I recall this memory, and if this mystery we call God has a sense of humour, then the angels were chuckling too.

I was asking for a sign. And lately, we've been reading about Jesus' warnings about asking for signs. In Luke 11:29-32, he is quite adamant: "This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah."

Jonah became a sign to the city of Nineveh; Jesus is telling the crowds that he, Jesus, is the sign, the only sign we need. And he, Jesus, is greater than Jonah, whose fabulous tale involves being swallowed by a large fish, and greater than Solomon.

Although probably not an historical character, Jonah's story carries lessons. God asked Jonah to perform a mission – go to the pagans in the vast city of Nineveh and proclaim the true God.

Understandably, Jonah was terrified. Instead of heading for Nineveh, he boarded a ship going the other direction. When the sailors on board decide that Jonah's rebellion against God is the cause

of a devastating storm, they pitch him overboard.

Hence we get to the fish, who eventually decides he doesn't want Jonah either and coughs him up on shore.

Jonah gets the point. He heads to Nineveh and proclaims the Lord. He becomes a sign of God.

A good deacon friend said this years ago: "You may be the only Gospel someone reads today."

We're called to be signs, too. But this sign business still challenges me. The Gospels are full of the marvelous deeds of Jesus. The blind see, evil spirits are expelled, the multitudes are fed, the lepers cured. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead after days in the tomb.

Hopefully Jesus' message of love, mercy and inclusion was attracting crowds to him. But let's be honest – many of those crowds were attracted by the amazing stories they had heard of healing.

They saw and hoped for signs and wonders.

Jesus' incredible love and mercy propelled him toward helping those in need. Often, he would instruct the healed to tell no one. But people inevitably blabbed.

But these works also drew the crowds to hear his message. How many who listened to the Sermon on the Mount had come for miracles but stayed to hear the real message of how we are called to be the miracle, to be the sign.

It takes spiritual maturity to become the sign rather than, like a hopeful child, demanding one. We're in the midst of 40 days to ponder that. Forty – a sacred number. The rain fell for 40 days on Noah, the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness. Jesus was credited with 40 days in the desert.

During our 40 days, may we seek to see how God sends us out, like Jonah, to be a sign of Christ's limitless mercy.

SUNDAY WORSHIP

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC PRIESTS



Into the valley of death... and why we can embrace the end with joy

17th Mar 2024 – Lent, 5th

Sunday, Year B

St Patrick, Patron of Ireland

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The new covenant, written on the human heart

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Responsorial: from Psalm 51**R./: Create a clean heart in me, O God**

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and cleanse me of my sin. (R./)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me out from your presence, and do not take from me your Holy Spirit. (R./)

Give me back the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you. (R./)

Hebrews 5:7-10**The anguish of Jesus, faced with his passion**

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made



“In prayer Martin Luther King found himself asking if it was right to put himself and his family in danger. It was in that moment he decided to put the will of God and the welfare of his people before his own security and that of his family. He chose to serve God by working for those who were oppressed”

perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Gospel: John 12:20-30
By losing their life, the followers of Jesus will find it in a new way

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say?” Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this our Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.

Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.”

For others’ sake

Martin Luther King once wrote about a time when he knelt in prayer in the kitchen of his home in Alabama. Stones had been thrown through the window because of his call for civil rights for black people. His wife and children were in danger. He was already a respected academic and a promising career lay ahead. In prayer he found himself asking if it was right to put himself and them in danger?

It was in that moment he decided to put the will of God and the welfare of his people before his own security and that of his family. He chose to serve God by working for those who were most oppressed. In a sense, he chose to die so that others could more fully live. It was a striking echo of what Jesus says in the gospel reading, that the grain of wheat must fall into the ground to yield a rich harvest.

Jesus himself was the supreme expression of this principle. He is the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in dying yields a harvest of life. He describes that harvest in prophetic words: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

If God worked powerfully through the life of Jesus, He worked even more powerfully through the death of Jesus, a death that reveals the power of God’s love, even more fully than his life of healing and ministry, for the amazing love revealed in his death on the cross drew people to God, and continues to do so. Over the centuries, millions of people, by

looking upon the crucifix, have experienced God’s personal love and compassion and found themselves drawn to God in return. In accepting the loss of so much that was dear to him, in particular, his vibrant life and warm companionship with others, Jesus drew people of all nations to himself and, thereby, to sharing in God’s life.

It was when some Greeks (ie, foreigners) came to hear him speak that Jesus made this declaration; and then he asked: “What shall I say? Save me from this hour. No, it was for this reason I have come to this hour.” In these lovely spring days we may find ourselves sowing some seeds in the garden. The seed that dies in order to yield a new form of life is as familiar to us today as it was in the day of Jesus. This phenomenon of nature can speak to our own experience as much as it did to the experience of Jesus. Each of us in different ways has to accept some significant loss if we are to remain true to our deepest and best self, true to what God is asking of us.

Then there are other losses in life that we do not choose, but that are forced upon us. These are losses we have no choice but to accept. We may have to accept the loss of people we love and care about because of choices they make themselves. Parents may not wish to see a son or daughter go far away to live and work, but they accept this necessary loss out of respect for the one they love. In accepting the losses that life imposes, in letting go of those we love, we often find

something fuller and richer, just as Jesus’ disciples received him again in a new and fuller way through his resurrection from the dead and the sending of the Spirit.

At the end, for each of us, there is the final, unavoidable struggle to let go of our very life, with all the loss that is entailed in that. As we face of all these inevitable losses that are integral to life, we are strengthened by the words of Jesus in today’s gospel, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” We trust and believe that, at the end of the day, after we have struggled through all our losses, the Lord will draw us to himself, and, when that happens, we will lack nothing.

Into the Valley of Death

One focus during Lent is to reflect on our own death and to see our way through it. We all must die, as much as we don’t like the fact. We try to hide it, dodge it, deny it. Yet we can’t in fact escape it. Jesus came into the world, not so much to do away with death (not immediately) but to teach us how to die by his example and then to assure us that death does not say the last word about life. When we walk into the valley of death we do not walk alone. Jesus is with us because he’s been there before and knows what it is like. Moreover he promises us that just as he rose from the dead so will we. We will all be young again. We will all laugh again.

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See www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS...

JENNA MARIE COOPER



There's no age bar on attending Mass – but when it is a factor, it's okay to miss

Q: Now that we are in Lent, most Catholics I know are doing 'fish on Fridays' to conform to the fasting and abstinence requirement. But if I typically avoid meat or eat fish most days anyway, should I do something different for Lent, or just stay the same? I've heard some Catholics give up chocolate or fizzy drinks for Lent, and a priest recently told me I could even set aside a little extra time each Friday for private prayer and meditation. Could you comment?

A: The short answer is no: During Lent, a Catholic cannot substitute another form of penance for Friday abstinence from meat.

Canon 1251 of the Code of Canon Law tells us: 'Abstinence from meat, or from some other food as determined by the Episcopal Conference, is to be observed on all Fridays, unless a solemnity should fall on a Friday. Abstinence and fasting are to be observed on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.'

Part of the value of this mandatory Lenten Friday abstinence for all Catholics – even those Catholics who wouldn't normally be craving a meat-based meal – is not only the subjective sense of doing penance but also the solidarity and witness-value of a communal penitential practice. When we abstain from meat on Fridays in Lent, we are practising a penance alongside our brothers and sisters in the Church around the world.

On those occasions when we may need to visibly refuse meat, or otherwise choose a fish or vegetarian option on a Friday, we are also demonstrating the importance of our faith to each other and to non-Catholics.

This all being said, if you personally feel that Friday abstinence during Lent is not enough of a sacrifice to be spiritually beneficial for you, you are certainly free to incorporate another penitential practice in addition to abstinence on Fridays.

And while the only strictly binding Lenten obligations for Catholics are abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Fridays, and to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, it is customary, albeit not required, for Catholics to choose some additional spiritual practice for Lent at their own discretion. Traditionally, we speak of Lent as a time of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, so any penance falling



Pope Francis greets an elderly woman as he meets with people in Asuncion, Paraguay. 'On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. Canon law never mentions an upper age limit for this obligation.'

Photo: Paul Haring

As per Canon 1245, a bishop or priest can also 'commute' the Sunday obligation to 'some other pious work.' This means that the proper authority can essentially set some other prayerful activity as a substitution for the Sunday obligation for a specific person in a particular case.

So, for example, if a senior citizen feels uncomfortable traveling to Mass, their bishop or pastor can change the Sunday obligation to something like prayerfully reflecting on the readings of the day or watching a televised Mass.

Q: Our priest has recently stopped using the processional cross, and now we have no crucifix on the altar during Mass or at any other time. I have always thought that there is supposed to be a crucifix on the altar to remind us all of the suffering and passion of Christ.

A: Yes, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, the 'instruction book' for how Mass is to be celebrated, specifically indicates that 'on the altar or close to it, there is to be a cross adorned with a figure of Christ crucified' (GIRM, No. 117). Presumably, this is not only to remind us of Christ's passion, but also to help call to mind how the holy sacrifice of the Mass is the same thing as Christ's original sacrifice of his life on Calvary.

GIRM 117 goes on to tell us that a processional crucifix may also be used for this purpose. But either way, it is clear that a crucifix is required. If it looks as though your own parish is not following this norm, the best thing to do would be to share your concerns directly with your priest in a respectful way. Sometimes your local diocesan office can also be a good resource for these kinds of liturgical questions.

Jenna Marie Cooper, who holds a licentiate in canon law, is a consecrated virgin and a canonist. Send your questions to CatholicQA@osv.com.

generally into one of these categories would be appropriate.

Q: My older sister told me that, after the age of 80, you are relieved of the duty to attend Sunday Mass. I didn't believe her until a friend who is 86 told me the same thing. I have never heard of this. Is it true?

A: I have never heard of this either! The relevant citation in Code of Canon Law, Canon 1247, indicates: 'On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass.' Canon law never mentions an upper age limit for this obligation.

There are some obligations for Catholics which do have stated age parameters. For example, Canon 1252 tells us that the obligation to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday 'binds those who have attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year,' meaning that, once a Catholic turns 60, they are no longer required to keep the fast. The fact that our law demonstrates its willingness to set upper age limits for some obligations makes the lack of a stated age limit for the Sunday

obligation all the more striking.

That being said, nobody is bound to an obligation that is impossible or gravely difficult to fulfill. It can happen that, by the time a person reaches 80, various age-related issues could prevent them from attending Mass in person. For example, health issues might leave them too ill to go out to church, and transport might become an issue if an elderly person is no longer able to drive. In colder climates, winter weather conditions might also present more of a concern for a senior citizen than they would for someone a few decades younger.

But if an octogenarian thereby found themselves to be no longer bound by the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays, this lack of an obligation would be directly attributable to one of these kinds of above-mentioned reasons, and not simply due to the year they were born. An 80-something Catholic in good health who was capable of physically traveling to Mass would be just as bound to observe the Sunday obligation as their younger counterparts. And, by the same token, a 20-something Catholic

who was legitimately impeded from attending Mass due to reasons of health or logistics would be likewise excused from the Sunday obligation.

At the end of the day, our discernment of whether or not we are excused from the duty to attend Mass is a matter of conscience. The Church trusts us to make this determination in good faith; we're not asked to provide 'proof' to anyone that attending Mass is prohibitively difficult for us.

But if an older adult is having a hard time weighing whether their circumstances truly excuse them from the Sunday obligation, it might be helpful for them to ask for advice from one's confessor or parish priest.

And although it would not be strictly necessary, if it helps to bring clarity or ease the conscience of a Catholic who is on the fence about whether or not they should stay home from Mass, it is possible to request a formal dispensation from the Sunday obligation. Such a dispensation can be granted by either the local bishop or, more conveniently, from a parish priest. (See Canons 87 and 1245.)

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst continues its reflections on Christian prayer. This week, the most famous prayer of all, the Lord's prayer, is explored, giving us a key into the inexhaustible riches of the mind of Christ.

Understanding the greatest prayer of them all: the Lord's

In the past four reflections, we reviewed the four parts of prayer as understood by Saint Thomas Aquinas. Now, in light of those reflections, we will look briefly at the prayer taught by Christ himself, the Lord's Prayer, showing how the four parts are present, whether implicitly or explicitly, in this most fundamental of Christian prayers.

Oration: "Our Father..."

The opening cry of the prayer immediately places the man Jesus (and with him, all of us), in the status of children before God. This is a first and general expression of our humility and our complete dependency on the Father and Creator of all things.

Thanksgiving: "...who art in heaven."

Here we further recognise God's greatness by specifically acknowledging his place above us in heaven.

Intercession: The notion of intercession is perhaps not as explicit as the others, but is nevertheless present in the fact that this prayer is always made in the second person plural: "Our Father." Thus we are meant to pray this together, as a unified Christian community for ourselves and for one another.

Petition: The Lord's Prayer is famously marked by a series of seven petitions, in which we ask God for the most basic of temporal needs as well as the needs of our eternal soul.

As we can see, all four parts are contained in a nutshell in the very words of Christ. Thus when we pray with all four parts in mind, we are continuing our imitation of the Lord Jesus himself, who taught us how pray with these very words.

Since petition is indeed the most central aspect of prayer, a further look into each the seven petitions of

the Lord's Prayer will help us appreciate this most archetypal of Christian prayers.

"Hallowed be thy name": Just as the first two of the Ten Commandments are tied to the glory of God and his name, here we ask not so much that God add greatness to his name, for nothing more can be added to the infinite God. Rather we ask that his name might be magnified ever more in human hearts. This petition is, essentially, a request for the diffusion of the Gospel message to all, and a preparatory step for the next petition.

"Thy kingdom come": Here we express an eschatological hope in the final consummation of all creation into the original order and harmony intended by the Creator.

"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven": Building more upon the previous petition, we ask not only for harmony within creation or in the natural order. We also ask for the participative conformity of the order of nature with the order of grace.

"Give us this day our daily bread": In the Gospel of Matthew, the phrase "daily" is actually rendered with an interesting term which is unique in the entire Bible.

The bread is described with the Greek term *epiousion*, in Latin *supersubstantialem*: this bread is 'super-substantial.'

More than our regular requirement for sustenance, Matthew is pointing us to a bread whose substance is higher than the

"The opening cry of the prayer places Jesus (and with him, all of us), in the status of children before God. This is a first and general expression of our humility and our complete dependency on the Father and Creator of all things..."



mere bread we need for bodily survival. Indeed, the Eucharistic echo of this word rings clear in Matthew's Greek, and it is therefore fitting that we pray the Lord's Prayer before receiving the true supersubstantial bread at Holy Communion.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us": If the previous petition points us to the Holy Eucharist, this one points us to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

As the Lord says in another place: "if you are presenting your sacrifice at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your sacrifice there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your sacrifice" (Matthew 5:23-24).

If we must be reconciled to one another before completing our offering, how much more should we be reconciled with God before receiving Him in the Blessed Sacrament?

"Lead us not into temptation": This petition can sound strange to our ears. Is not God the one "who can neither deceive nor be deceived," as the First Vatican Council reminds us?

Is not Satan the one whose name means "tempter"? The notion that God might lead into something bad, as implied by this verse, is so difficult that even Pope Francis ordered a new Italian translation of the Our Father which reads "do not abandon us to temptation." Yet even this rendering is not free of problems. Is not God, as the Psalmist tells us, the one who will not abandon us even if our parents leave us orphaned (Psalm 27:10)? The full meaning of this petition is only understood in concert with the seventh and final petition.

"Deliver us from evil": This petition is linked to the previous

one by a parallelism characteristic of biblical rhetoric.

Verses like "The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon" (Psalm 92:12) or "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it" (Song of Songs 8:7) contain two phrases whose meanings run together but are expressed in different ways. When God delivers us from evil, he is at the same time keeping us free from temptation. So it is less a question of God potentially acting in a way that directly places temptation before us; rather, we acknowledge that when we actively experience his saving power, temptations naturally stand powerless.

With all these things in mind, we see how the Lord's Prayer expresses a breadth and profundity which can be masked by its brevity.

Its short phrases and seven petitions are a key into the inexhaustible riches of the mind of Christ, who left it to us as the prime example of prayer.

• In the next instalment, we will consider liturgical prayer.



AROUND THE PARISHES & EDUCATION

The Universe Catholic Weekly's guide
to Catholic life in your neighbourhood



Joy as the world comes to Walsall to celebrate the wonders of our faith

Mgr Daniel McHugh

I remember my first visit to Rome: it was with a school party when I was about 14, and the Pope Venerable Pius XII was on the Chair of Peter. I can still remember the joy of the international nature of the crowds gathered in St Peter's Square for a Feast Day.

Well, we are blessed in our archdiocese in these days to have an opportunity to celebrate the joy of the worldwide nature of the Church at home. Such was the experience of the Intercultural Mass celebrated by Archbishop Bernard Longley on Saturday, 24th February in St Mary the Mount Church, Walsall.

The joyous occasion took place to mark the Feast of the Chair of St Peter: a Feast that celebrates the unity of the Church with Peter and his successors in our profession of faith in Jesus Christ the Messiah.

In his homily Archbishop Longley spoke of this unity of all peoples in the Catholic Faith as our "gift to the world". The congregation, from local deaneries, parishes and ethnic



chaplaincies gathered for in traditional dress from their home countries. They presented flags from their countries to the

archbishop, who announced their presence at the beginning of Mass.

The congregation sang to different instruments including

drums and read in their own languages, while Cameroonian women danced the Offertory as Vietnamese children brought up

the gifts. Students from St Francis of Assisi composed the bidding prayers and priests wore colourful vestments. The people shared food typical of their national cuisine at the social after Mass

It was truly a special experience, one that has been celebrated each year (except during COVID) since the 1970s. Some parishes are celebrating their own intercultural Masses particularly on Pentecost Sunday: what a great way to celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The hospitality of the Vocationist Fathers, who serve parishes and ethnic chaplaincies in a number of areas in the archdiocese, was crucial to the success of the occasion.

So too was the co-operation of the local deaneries of Lichfield and Walsall, and Dudley and Wolverhampton, and the ethnic chaplaincies, eparchies and missions.

Mgr Daniel McHugh is the co-ordinator for ethnic chaplaincies in the Archdiocese of Birmingham

A reflection on the annual intercultural Mass by parishioner Michael Doyle

The celebrant for the Mass was Archbishop Bernard Longley with Fr Jobin, parish priest, the Vocationalist Fathers and priests and deacons from the archdiocese.

To start the Mass, the processional hymn *How Great Thou Art* was sung by members of the local Hong Kong community in English and Cantonese.

The archbishop invited the various communities to bring their flags and banners to be placed around the sanctuary. It was so marvellous to see the wonderful colours of the flags and national dress of all the different communities.

The *Kyrie Eleison* was sung in Irish by Fr Eamonn Corduff, from the Birmingham Irish Association while the *Gloria Ngaarunbidzwe Kudenga-denga* was sung by the Zimbabwean Catholic Chaplaincy in Shona. This was sung in a happy way with a tremendous drum beat which electrified the church.

After the first reading by Christine Inniss of the West Indian Chaplaincy, the



responsorial psalm *Somi Mhojo Gonvlli* was sung by the Goan Community from St Michael and The Holy Angels, West Bromwich.

The Gospel acclamation was sung and read by the Hong Kong community. The Prayers of the Faithful were arranged by Lay Chaplain, Debbie Ferris, from St Francis of Assis, Catholic Church, Aldridge. The pupils read prayers in an array of languages which reflected the diversity of the congregation. The Hail Mary was chanted by Dr Faris Eila of the Chaldean Community in Syrian Western Aramaic.

The Offertory hymn *'Na Di Thing weech*

You give we Papa, na yin this we DI bringham so' was sung and danced by the Cameroonian Catholic Women's Association, with a very colourful and vibrant procession to the altar. The *Sanctus* was sung by the Filipino Community.

With the Lord's Prayer, we were all invited to recite the prayer in our native language. It was an interesting experience where all members of the congregation joined in which indicated the great solidarity and universality of the Catholic Church.

The Communion hymn *Malagalm* was sung by the Syro-Malabar Community and

the hymn *Mirembe Omukama Ayi Yezu Omwagalwa* was sung by the Uganda Chaplaincy in Luganda. Both were an amazing listening experience.

The Recessional Hymn *Nnam nara ekele, Chineke, umugi na 'nye gi ekele, izuruk'eme* was sung by the Blessed Carlo Acutis Parish African Community, which was a remarkable experience on our faith journey.

During the homily, Archbishop Bernard Longley said that the Intercultural Mass reflected the universality of the Church and that everyone, regardless of ethnic origins, is welcome in the house of the Lord.

Monsignor Canon McHugh, co-ordinator of Ethnic Chaplaincies, thanked everyone for attending. He mentioned that Fr Francis Martyn, founder of The Mount Church, was the first Catholic priest to be wholly educated and ordained in this country since the Reformation.

Monsignor Canon McHugh thanked Fr Jobin, parish priest of St Mary's The Mount, and the Vocationalist Fathers for the hosting of the Mass.

After the Mass, the congregation went to the parish centre for lunch provided by all the groups who participated in the Mass. The choice of food was excellent and many thanks to kind ladies and gentlemen of The Mount parish who served food and drinks.

Photographs: Con McHugh

Archbishop's book on council praised as vital work that brings Vatican II to life

Suresh Abboodass

Archbishop John Wilson of Southwark's literary talents have proved a hit with Catholic readers after his book on the Second Vatican Council became a big hit, with more than thousand copies sold in the first week of its publication.

Nearly 200 people including fellow, clergy, nuns and laity gathered for the book launch, which was held at the Amigo Hall of the St. George's Cathedral in Southwark London on 6th March.

The book, entitled *Pondering and Praying Vatican II*, has been published with the collaboration of the Pauline Books and Media UK, which is run by the Sisters of the congregation of Daughters of St. Paul.

Archbishop John Wilson said the book was an attempt "to help people see what a blessing the key documents of Vatican II are, by understanding our relationship with God and the Church."

"While many people have heard of Vatican II, few have actually read its content. I've set out something easily accessible, without specialist knowledge, that anyone can find it useful," he said. "You can have it by



your bed and read it everynight. It is user friendly to anyone who wants to reflect on what the Church said at the Vatican II," he said.

He also said that the book was a "timely resource focusing on the four constitutions which are the fundamental documents of the Council. These are: the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,

the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the one on Divine Revelation and, lastly, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," he stated.

"Understanding the Vatican II Council will help us to evangelise, each according to our vocation and to go out into the whole world to announce the Good News," he said.

"Relating with other Churches (ecumenism), and other beliefs (inter religious dialogue) were also at the core of the Second Vatican Council."

The Second Vatican Council started on 11th October 1962 and concluded on 8th December 1965, with over 4,000 bishops from all over the world participating in it. It was "a remarkable event in the Catholic Church," Archbishop John said. "By opening up the Vatican II Council, Pope John XXIII made it possible to enable the Church to meet the contemporary missionary demands of proclaiming the Gospel."

Archbishop John Wilson expressed his sincere gratitude to the Sisters of Pauline Media Group for their collaboration, without whose help and support this book would not have been possible to be published. He also expressed a special thanks to Rev. Sr Elaine, who first came up with the idea of publishing a book on the Second Vatican Council.

Former Archbishop and

Archbishop Emeritus Most Rev. Kevin McDonald paid glowing tributes to the archbishop's work. "Inclusion and relativity are the two fruits of the council," he said. He hoped that the faithful will find it immensely fruitful and enlightened as they venture to read this book.

Welcoming the gathering, Rev. Sr. Angela Grant of the Daughters of St. Paul described the book as "beautifully illustrated and eloquently written."

She added that it will help the readers to pause and reflect on the Church's role in the world as required by the Second Vatican Council, especially as the Jubilee Year 2025 approaches.

Nearly a hundred people, including the clergy, stood patiently in a long queue to get their copies signed by Archbishop John. It took about an hour to sign each copy, and he was visibly delighted with how the launch went.

The new book can be purchased from [Pauline UK.org](http://PaulineUK.org)

• Archbishop John's next venture in print will be a book on the life and teachings of the martyred Archbishop of El Salvador St. Oscar Romero.

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All Saints proud to fly the flag for inclusivity in education

Andy Drozdziak

A Catholic school has praised the fantastic work of its chaplaincy teams after it achieved the Inclusive School Award with Flagship status.

All Saints school in Dagenham was told: "The inclusive Catholic ethos shines through and permeates into all the school's pastoral and academic support."

Six students who are part of the school chaplaincy team and members of the Society of St. Joseph, spoke about the religious element of the school. They value the visual timetable on the plasma screen, reminding people when different religious events are happening each day, such as times for the rosary.

They spoke about being role models for the school and they hope that the younger children learn from them. They talked about the work of the two school chaplains and how there is always someone to speak with.

Reflecting on the award, headteacher Clare Cantle told the *Universe*: "This re-accreditation as a Flagship school is testament to the dedication of our staff and embedded Catholic ethos of our pupils and that their families live by."

Its most recent Ofsted in March 2023 praised school leaders for being 'committed to ensuring success for every pupil. Pupils study the learning pathway which reflects their skills, talents, needs and abilities. This ensures that no child is left behind. Pupils with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) are well supported.'



The chapel is the heart of the school; all pupils and staff attend Mass throughout the week. On a Friday before school, there is an open Mass for anyone who wants to worship. This is very well attended.

Deputy headteacher Nick Pauro highlighted "the fantastic work of our chaplains and Society of St Joseph that lead the school in our areas of vocation, and a curriculum that is underpinned by the uncovering of truth, developing goodness and appreciating beauty."

Prefects spoke about each form group having a Saint charity as a

focus for fundraising, underlining a strong sense of community and family. With the chapel at the heart of the school, and high numbers of pupils and staff attending Mass throughout the week, Nick Pauro told the *Universe* that the school does all it can to live out its Catholic ethos.

"Together with the work of our pastoral teams, each given a saintly mission, the school as a community does all it can to live out the Gospel and form a positive, inclusive future for our pupils," he said.

Mr Pauro also explained the

ethos of the school's Society of St Joseph-developing strong Christian virtues in the students in the footsteps of St Joseph.

"(The Society) of St Joseph was principally because we wanted to instil the virtue of humility and have our boys made more aware of the service and duty of a 'good father' and often doing service with perhaps not the most obvious of 'rewards'," he said. "The idea was to have a society of pupils who work away, like a humble carpenter, at helping the school community made 'good' and open to worship."



Litter-free thanks to pupils at Our Lady of the Rosary

Serving the local community is important to a Catholic primary school in Peterlee – and now they can hold regular litter picks thanks to a £500 grant.

Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Primary School, which is part of Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, successfully applied for a Believe Housing community grant to buy litter-picking equipment for the school.

The project has the two-fold benefits of supporting the health and wellbeing of the school's pupils and helping to keep the local community litter-free.

Science lead and Year 2 teacher Susan Jones and teaching assistant Marguerite Elrick will lead the OLOTR Litter Pickers group, which will organise a litter pick every half-term within walking distance of the school.

The funding will purchase litter-picking equipment for 10 children. Last July, the school was also granted a £500 Muddy Faces award from Washington Wetlands Trust, which they will use to buy more litter-picking equipment.

"As a Catholic school, our mission is 'Christ at the centre, children at the heart' and spending our time to plan and carry out this project will be something we would love to do from the heart," said Mrs Jones.

"This project will educate the younger generation and their families about the importance of picking up litter and the impact of litter on the local and wider environment,"

"Peterlee has a lot of shops, schools and people walking and driving through, so keeping Peterlee tidy is important. We will work closely with Peterlee White Watch who have stressed their interest in supporting us with community projects that care for the local environment.

"We already go to Crimdon Beach to carry out beach cleans twice a year, but the children are keen to do the same on their doorstep.

"We will develop community links by involving parents, grandparents and carers in this project and run an after-school club to tidy the school grounds."

Parish teamwork ensures 300th life-saving defibrillator installed outside St Mary's

Brian Lafferty

St Mary's Church in Great Yarmouth has celebrated the addition of a new defibrillator, the 300th installed by Heart 2 Heart Norfolk, enhancing local emergency response capabilities.

The defibrillator was installed outside the church on 29th February.

Discussions about bringing a defibrillator to the church began five years ago between Brian Lafferty, chairman of St Mary's Church Finance Committee, and Jayne Biggs, founder of Heart 2 Heart Norfolk. Unforeseen circumstances caused a temporary delay, the project is finally complete.

"In the past, we've had medical emergencies where retrieving a defibrillator required a significant



Pictured at the unveiling are Fr Anthony Nwankwo, Brian Lafferty and Jayne Biggs from Great Yarmouth.

distance," explains Brian Lafferty. "Having this new defibrillator readily available gives us much more confidence, knowing every second counts in these situations."

Heart 2 Heart Norfolk provided the defibrillator and cabinet. Breckland Fabrications Ltd and Jorge Silva Carpentry collaborated on constructing the housing frame,

with final assembly completed by Jorge Silva Carpentry and electrical functionality ensured by Bowers & Barr Ltd. This collaborative effort ensures the equipment is easily accessible for public use.

The defibrillator is registered with the National Defibrillator Network. When calling 999, the ambulance service will provide the code to access the cabinet.

A statement from St Mary's Church said: "Fr Anthony of St Mary's Church is proud to have this vital piece of equipment serve our community."

Heart 2 Heart Norfolk is a volunteer-run, non-profit organisation dedicated to saving lives by increasing access to defibrillators throughout the region.

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HEALTH

Open wide – your wallet that is, if you want to have your teeth treated

Ian Mills asks, with NHS dentistry in what looks like a state of permanent crisis – are overseas dentists the answer?

Images of a long line of desperate people queuing around the block in the hope of getting on the list at a new dental practice in Bristol paint a bleak picture of the state of NHS dentistry.

The situation got so desperate that police were called to provide crowd control in a scene more typical of a Taylor Swift concert than a dental waiting room. This unprecedented demand is due to a shortage of dentists in the UK, particularly ones who are willing to work for the NHS.

There may be a record number of dentists on the General Dental Council (GDC) register – over 44,000 at the start of 2024 – yet a workforce shortage is still considered a major contributing factor in the lack of dental access in the UK.

Registration figures can be misleading. Although the number of dentists in the UK is increasing, there are 1,100 fewer doing NHS work than before the pandemic, the lowest since 2012. These figures do not take into consideration changing work patterns within the dental profession, which indicate that younger dentists are working fewer clinical hours and less time within the NHS.

It is worth noting that the UK has lower numbers of dentists per head of population compared with many other European countries. The UK has 5.3 dentists per 10,000 of the population compared with 6.5 in France, 8.3 in Italy and 8.5 in Germany.

The shortage of dentists, and other dental care professionals, has finally been recognised by the Government, with a NHS long-term workforce plan setting out clear goals to increase the number of training places for dentists, hygienists and dental therapists.

The Government aims to increase dental training places in the UK by 40 per cent by 2031–32, with 1,100 UK dentists qualifying each year.

Dentistry is a five-year university programme. Following that, graduates need to work for a minimum of one year as a dental foundation trainee before they are allowed to work independently as a general dental practitioner in



The scene in Bristol as people queue to join a new NHS dentist's waiting list

the NHS. As a result, any increase in training places will take more than a decade to have a significant effect.

The workforce plan will offer little in the way of solace to the millions of people who currently cannot find a dentist. Urgent action is needed to avoid lengthening queues, and the Government appears to have identified overseas graduates as a potential answer to their problems.

Thirty per cent of dentists on the GDC register qualified outside the UK, and in 2022, 46 per cent of new dentists joining the register were international dental graduates.

The process of obtaining registration for international dental graduates is difficult, expensive and inefficient. It can take several years to pass the necessary exams and obtain UK registration. During that time applicants are unable to work as a dentist.

The situation is compounded by a limited number of examination places each year and a low pass rate for the practical exam (45 per cent).

The GDC has announced an increase in exam capacity, which will allow more dentists to take the overseas registration exams. This is a practical approach to increase capacity while safeguarding standards.

The Government has just announced a further development: the introduction of provisional registration, aimed at accelerating the registration process and allowing international

dental graduates to work as a dentist without having to pass a UK examination.

This has already caused concern within the dental profession, with some commentators fearful that patient safety will be sacrificed in a race to increase dentist numbers and improve NHS access.

This view is clearly not shared by the GDC who have been quick to welcome the introduction of provisional registration.

The GDC has a responsibility to ensure that any dental professional joining the dental register has undergone the appropriate training, is capable of providing a high standard of patient care, and is fully aware of their responsibilities as a dental registrant.

The NHS is a complex system, and the current NHS dental contract and regulations are complicated and confusing. UK graduates often struggle to comprehend the nuances of the NHS, and international dental graduates will need support to ensure they are able to integrate into a new system.

Training and mentorship are important considerations. This will be a critical aspect of integrating overseas dentists into the NHS and ensuring the highest standards of care are maintained.

This cannot be done without the support of the existing primary care workforce, and consideration must be given to how this is going to be delivered and resourced.

Patient safety

International dental graduates are an important part of the solution to the current workforce shortage, and a review of the present registration process was certainly long overdue. There is huge potential to use an overseas workforce more effectively, but we must ensure that patient safety remains paramount.

We must also reflect on the ethical implications of recruiting dentists from another country while considering the fairness of introducing international dental graduates into a widely criticised NHS system.

Sustainability and continuity are valuable assets in healthcare, and the creation of a two-tier system delivered by an itinerant workforce must be avoided at all costs.

Simplifying the recruitment of overseas dentists will not save NHS dentistry alone. The problems run much deeper than a simple workforce shortage. There needs to be an honest discussion with the public, the profession and politicians about NHS dentistry. What do we want? What do we need? And what can we afford?

There is no merit in recruiting more dentists if there is no commitment to address the reason so many of the workforce are leaving the NHS.

Ian Mills is an Associate Professor in Primary Care Dentistry, University of Plymouth

GARDENING

Feed the soil, let the soil feed the plants – the heart of organic gardening

Feed the soil, and let the soil feed the plants. It's one of two axioms I live by when it comes to gardening advice.

But if you're like many, I know what you're thinking; soil doesn't need the nutrients; the plants do. So how does feeding the soil help our plants? There is another world below the soil surface that most home gardeners don't fully appreciate.

Yet soil scientists tell us that in ideal conditions, it is teeming with billions of beneficial microorganisms that provide plants with everything they need to grow and prosper naturally.

Of course, that assumes we haven't desiccated the soil with excessive salts that come from overuse of synthetic fertilisers. Instead, we should improve the soil with a steady supply of organic matter – compost, shredded leaves, or aged manure – to promote plant growth by maintaining a healthy soil food web.

Think of it regarding our own bodies. If we're trying to be as healthy as we can, do we fill up on a bunch of junk food every time we're hungry? Or do we opt for something that satisfies our hunger craving but also isn't loading our bodies with a bunch of fat building empty calories? It's the junk food vs. whole foods argument, but it can be applied to plants, too.

Plants can get their primary nutrients in one of two ways. The first is through manmade synthetic fertilisers. This is typically salt-based compounds which include nutrients such as nitrogen, potassium, or phosphorus. Those chemicals become available to the plant as the particles dissolve, or when they pass by the roots, as with water-soluble fertilisers.

To be sure, this is a proven way to get nutrients into the plant quickly. And it works – very well. But so does junk food to ease your hunger pangs – temporarily. While your plants will respond to the fertiliser, and your taste buds will love the junk food, is that really how you want to take care of your health... or the health of your plants long term?

"In this method, rather than trying to satisfy the immediate craving by supplying a quick fix with no real lasting nutritional value, the focus instead is on giving soil what it needs to naturally provide nutrients that are available to plant roots when needed most..."



Nutrients that aren't immediately taken up as they pass by the roots are gone forever. And that says nothing about the salt remaining behind. To make matters worse, the excess and unused chemicals pass through to aquifers, or as runoff into watersheds. Either way, the damage downstream to plants, wildlife, climate and humans can have adverse consequences.

While it's true that it would take a lot of salt residue to significantly harm all the living organisms in the surrounding soil, it does have

an adverse effect, especially cumulatively. That brings us to the second method of delivering nutrients to plants, the alternative to synthetic (junk food) fertiliser.

It's organic matter such as compost and organic fertiliser that builds the lasting health of the soil. If synthetics are junk food, then this organic matter is health food... and my method of choice for building long-term soil quality.

In this method, rather than trying to satisfy the immediate craving by supplying a quick fix

with no real lasting nutritional value, the focus instead is on giving soil what it needs to naturally provide nutrients that are available to plant roots when needed most.

These organic nutrients must first be broken down and digested by soil organisms, from bacteria and fungi to other soil-dwelling creatures including small insects up to the mighty earthworm. Collectively, they release nutrients in an organic form that plants can use, while also improving soil structure.

Unlike water-soluble synthetic chemicals, organically-derived nutrients bind to soil particles and are far less likely to leech. The net result is a cache of nutrients that remain in the soil until utilized by plants... with little risk to plants of burning or dehydration, even in periods of extreme drought or over-application.

As we continue to feed the soil with organic matter (through compost, leaf litter, worm castings, food scraps, natural fertiliser, etc.) existing soil organisms utilize these inputs and continue to supply food and nutrients for a soil environment that supports other living organisms and plant life. The result is a thriving, balanced ecosystem. Just the way nature intended.

Continued next week....



Left: Next week, 'You can easily make your own compost (nature's superfood) for free. All the ingredients you need come from many things you would otherwise throw away from inside and outside your house.'

FOOD

Snacking for dinner? You're right on trend

How do you get your snack on in 2024? Dip for dinner? Are you creating your own perfect bite? There's no doubt about it. Frito-Lay's beloved foods – Lay's, Doritos, Tostitos, Cheetos, PopCorners and more – are an integral part of match days, celebrations and adventures.

This privilege does not happen overnight and the company is committed to keeping a pulse on societal shifts, ensuring it is meeting our ever-evolving preferences and needs.

This year's survey discovered there is a real lack of time in people's lives to prepare, eat and enjoy their meals, especially among parents and younger generations. One-third have just 30 minutes for meals, and that includes cooking! When you think about it, that's less time than most work commutes. Sound familiar?

This is leading to the rise of the "no-prep dinner" – a simple meal that tastes great, doesn't require a whole lot of effort and often is inspired by their favourite snacks. Snack-focused dinners are so popular there's even a trending hashtag, #GirlDinner. But the trend involves everyone, with more than 92% of men and women noting they reach for snack foods at dinnertime.

Here are some other snack trends the survey found.

A dash to dine: According to the Index, the average person has only 52 total minutes per day to prepare, eat and enjoy their meals. One-third of consumers note having even less time, scraping together less than 30 minutes a



day to prep and enjoy meals.

Snacks moving to centre plate: With a 35% increase in consumers integrating their favourite snack products into meals, snacks are taking centre stage in a new way. Ninety-two percent of men and 93% of women use snack foods when making meals. Whether it's yearning for a specific snack (51%) or simply being too busy to cook (44%), Frito-Lay's 2024 Snack Index predictions suggest that snacks will only

continue to be essential ingredients for easy, no-prep meals.

The dip dynasty: Dive into the timeless tradition of chips and dip, where Salsa (27%), French Onion (21%), and Queso (20%) reign supreme as the top three rival dips. While Salsa steals the spotlight among Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X dippers, Baby Boomers crown French Onion as their dip MVP.

Snacking as an art, not an act: Eighty percent

agree that combining multiple food products to create the perfect bite is an art form. While 65% admit to having eccentric snack combos, they are not the slightest bit embarrassed and will proudly "shout their unique combos from the rooftops" anyway.

Defining the "Snack Savant": Millennials (83%) and Gen Z (82%) are most likely to embrace this title, with the majority of these Snack Savants also being city dwellers (77%). They are resourceful – 55% report their favourite snack combinations are inspired by what is already in the pantry – and lean on social media for additional ideas (32%).

Protein power: When eyeing snacks at the grocery store, protein is the most important nutritional attribute (55%). Compared to previous years, an overwhelming 79% of consumers admit it's more critical than ever for protein to take centre stage – especially true for those most crunched on time (80%).

Energy boost: At least once a week, 60% of consumers look to their favourite snack products to provide energy. Millennials (72%) are by far the generation most in need of a pick-me-up, compared to Gen Z (62%), Gen X (61%) and Baby Boomers (46%).

Parents have everyone beat, with 72% leveraging snacks for energy.

Taste triumphs: Across generations, nearly three-quarters of consumers (74%) refuse to sacrifice taste when selecting their snacks. Baby Boomers are the most unwilling to compromise. on taste (84%), followed by Gen Xers at 75%.

Four tips to live a heart-healthy lifestyle

If you have concerns about the health of your heart, you can make positive changes to your well-being by evaluating how your everyday lifestyle affects your heart health. To get started, take steps to understand your risk, then consider making healthier choices to help lower your chances of heart disease.

Registered Dietitian and Nutritionist Dawn Jackson Blatner shares a few of her tips to help you live a heart-healthy lifestyle.

1. Know your risk

Getting regular health screenings as part of your annual exam is crucial to understanding your risk for heart disease. By consulting with your primary healthcare provider on a regular basis, you can ask questions and get advice on practical steps you could take to improve your well-being.

"Regular wellness visits are a crucial part of staying healthier," Blatner advises. "And it's always recommended to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise routine or nutrition programme."

2. Stay active

Try to fit 30–60 minutes of physical activity into your day, which can include walking, gardening or household chores, as well as swimming, dancing, playing a sport or going to a fitness class. Various aerobic activities that get your heart rate up, strength exercises to build muscle or stretching for flexibility are usually a good mix.

Make it easier to exercise enough each day by breaking up activity into smaller chunks rather than doing it all at once.

3. Reduce stress

The good news is that many of the activities you can do to keep physically active have the added benefit of reducing your stress levels. Exercise can improve your mood, reduce tension and help you focus throughout your day.


Apart from exercise, you can try meditation, breathing exercises and other relaxing activities

that help you feel calm and reduce anxiety.

4. Focus on foods that boost wellness


Eat a variety of nutritious foods to help improve your blood pressure and cholesterol, including veggies and fruits, whole grains, healthy fats like avocado, lean meats and eggs. (see below)





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 FILMS

John Mulderig

If its 2021 predecessor was a fine film, *Dune: Part Two* (Warner Bros.) is nothing short of a knockout. While director and co-writer Denis Villeneuve is firing on all cylinders aesthetically, however, this continuation of the franchise includes a few morally problematic ingredients that were absent from the original.

The military and the mystical continue to blend in the story of Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet). The scion of an aristocratic dynasty, Paul is now in exile as the result of a conspiracy against his formerly powerful family – a plot that cost Paul's father his life.

Having taken refuge with the desert dwellers who populate the planet of the dunes, Paul places himself at the service of their leader, Stilgar (Javier Bardem). As Paul gradually learns to fit into his new surroundings and sharpens his fighting skills, he falls for local warrior Chani (Zendaya).

Chani wants Paul to pursue purely secular ends. But Paul's priestess mother, Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), continues to insist that he is the messiah figure foretold in various prophecies.

The script, penned with Jon Spaihts, charts Paul's struggle to discern his true destiny, especially in light of recurring visions that show him the horrible destruction that will result if he does take on a spiritual role. As he ponders which path to pursue, thematic hints about the dangers of either craving or wielding power recall Catholic author J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

As he extends his adaptation of Frank Herbert's celebrated 1965 sci-fi novel, Villeneuve enraptures with sweeping visuals, appealing central characters and an absorbing plot. He also manages, once again, to infuse the proceedings with a convincing tone of gravitas as well as an aura of high stakes at play.

As for the religious elements of Paul's story, they seem to be borrowed more from Islam than Christianity, though a scene of quasi-resurrection briefly hews the other way. Like the mythos of any obviously fanciful tale, though, this aspect of the picture is unlikely to lead to any real-life confusion.



Timothée Chalamet

Buckle in for part 2 of the Dune epic

On the other hand, Paul is out for vengeance against the enemies of his clan. And the progress of his romance with Chani finds the two of them shacking up – indeed, late plot developments make it abundantly clear that, though they may share a bed, they are definitely not married.

Taken together, these elements suggest a mature viewership for this crackerjack second chapter.

One thing the actors agree on is that the cast

is a tight knit team was brought together who worked together effectively to produce an excellent film. Spiderman star Zendaya told Buzzfeed: "Dream casting here – and I think something that I've been so grateful for in this journey is being able to work with people who are also lovely people and enjoyable to work with. To learn and grow from them makes the whole experience so much better."

Wonka star Timothée Chalamet simply said: "I don't think we could have gotten luckier."

"Villeneuve enraptures with sweeping visuals, appealing central characters and an absorbing plot. He also manages to infuse a convincing tone of gravitas as well as an aura of high stakes at play."

Film captures the drive of an astonishing modern saint

Kristina Cooper

There is a striking bronze of the St Francesca Cabrini, popularly known as Mother Cabrini, in St George's Cathedral in south London. A sickly Italian nun, with a passion for the poor, she became one of the first American citizens to be canonised as a saint.

I knew nothing about her so I was delighted to be able to watch this beautiful and inspirational new film about her life produced by Metanoia films. This is the same team behind *Sound of Freedom*, the drama about child trafficking that was a surprise hit last summer.

Cabrini concentrates on the nun's first few years on coming to America in the late 1880s. Her desire had been to go to China, but this was refused. Unperturbed, she boldly insists on speaking to the Pope (Leo XIII), played by Italian actor Giancarlo Giannini. He, seeing her force of character, sends her instead to America, where the poverty and suffering of the newly arrived Italian immigrants had reached his attention.

Cabrini arrives with half a dozen of her sisters in their black dresses and bonnets into the filth and depravity of the slums of New York. They are not welcomed by the official Church but touchingly it is a battered prostitute who is the



Cristiana Dell'Anna as Mother Cabrini

only one to show them hospitality. The film, typical of director Alejandro Monteverde's work, is beautifully shot. Every scene looks like a beautiful *chiaroscuro* painting. Even the slums

and sewers somehow manage to look romantic, lit as they are with soft candlelight and gas lamps.

Although I loved the look, I did wonder if this rather dented the harshness and reality of it. On reflection, however, I decided that in a way it was appropriate because of Mother Cabrini's faith and her understanding of God being with her. This would have enabled her to see beauty and possibility where to others there was none.

Cabrini, played by Cristiana Dell'Anna, a bilingual actress, may look like a Madonna, but she ably incarnates the fierce passion of the nun who is not afraid to take on anyone. None of the men, however powerful or evil, are a match for her force and passion and political acumen.

Far from holding grudges, when she goes to confront the corrupt mayor (John Lithgow), whom Cabrini suspects of colluding in the burning down of her new hospital, she negotiates with him, warning him that if he wants the Italian immigrant vote in the next election, he needs to support her work and not undermine her. He gets the message and they drink whisky together.

The story positively races along, underlining Mother Cabrini's superhuman strength and

vision. I am sure things were a little more difficult than is portrayed in the film. Feral children don't usually scrub up quite so easily and turn into co-operative obedient pupils. Also I can imagine working under such a driven, demanding woman, even if she was a saint, must have been hard to live up to for her fellow nuns. But none of this is explored. Instead the film concentrates in a vivid way on Cabrini's remarkable faith, courage and ingenuity and trust in God.

Her vision was huge – a determination to build, as she said, "An Empire of Hope". When she arrived in America she was told she only had two years to live because of her damaged lungs. But she defied the doctors too and lived until she was 67. Her legacy remains today in a huge network of hospitals, schools and orphanages around the world.

The work of cinematographer Gorka Gómez Andreu is packed with beautifully composed images. And Dell'Anna manages to convey a sense of Cabrini's unshakable determination as well as a mysterious stateliness entirely free of self-importance.

This fine portrait of the indefatigable foundress is worthy of her wide-ranging legacy – which is saying a great deal.

Sacré bleu! How the French tried to meddle in a very English civil war

HISTORY

Gordon McKelvie

The Wars of the Roses are normally portrayed as a series of battles between two warring houses, York and Lancaster, over who was rightly king of England. However, they were about much more than that. In many ways, the wars were really about standards of government.

Remembered mostly as an English-only affair, on the 550th anniversary of the Battle of Tewkesbury, a key event in the wars, it is worth remembering how the wider politics of late-Medieval Europe, particularly France, shaped this important, and often commemorated, part of English history.

The Wars of the Roses were three distinct conflicts. The first phase of the wars ended when the Lancastrian king, Henry VI, was usurped by the 18-year-old Edward IV, who then cemented his position by winning the Battle of Towton.

Conflict re-emerged a decade later, this time caused by the deteriorating personal relations between the Yorkist king, Edward IV, and his closest ally and advisor, the Earl of Warwick, later known as 'the Kingmaker'. During this instability, problems in England were drawn into a wider sets of events. Foreign rulers, particularly the French king, Louis XI, and his main adversary, Charles, Duke of Burgundy, were able to exploit these divisions.

A scandalous marriage

The Earl of Warwick started the 1460s as the key figure in government, with key military and diplomatic responsibilities that helped secure Edward's newly won kingdom. However, as the decade progressed, Warwick's control over the young king waned as Edward sought his council less and less. The key division between the two men was foreign policy, a key aspect of medieval government.

In 1464, Edward secretly married Elizabeth Woodville, the widow of a knight killed fighting for the Lancastrians three years earlier. This was a scandalous marriage. Kings married to form wider alliances that would benefit the kingdom, never for love. The ceremony also occurred as Warwick was negotiating a union with a French princess, causing the earl much embarrassment.

A connected issue was the different visions that Edward and



On 30th December, 1460, the heirs to the Lancastrian nobles killed at St Albans five years earlier at last had their revenge, trapping the Duke of York and the Earl of Salisbury near Wakefield. Painting by Graham Turner.

Warwick had of England's role within wider European politics.

France was also politically unstable at the time, with Louis XI (nicknamed the 'Universal Spider') clashing with many of his leading subjects, particularly the Duke of Burgundy who had significant independent power.

While Warwick favoured an alliance with Louis, Edward preferred an alliance with the Duke of Burgundy.

The duke was more than simply a subject of the French king as Burgundy ruled over the Low Countries, which constituted much of modern-day Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. As such, Edward believed an alliance with Burgundy would provide England with stronger commercial ties with many Flemish and Dutch towns.

It also had the added advantage of avoiding an unpopular alliance with one of England's traditional enemies, the French. The alliance was cemented when Edward secured the marriage of his sister to the duke in 1468.

Crisis and opportunity

While this was happening, many Lancastrians remained at large. The deposed Henry VI was eventually captured as a fugitive in July 1465 and imprisoned in the Tower of London. His French wife (Margaret of Anjou) and their son (Prince Edward) spent much of the

1460s trying to gain foreign allies to support a Lancastrian restoration, particularly the French king.

For Louis XI, however, Margaret's cause was a lost one until divisions in England became beneficial to the French king. Little did he know that the situation in England was turning in such a way.

The fractions between Warwick and Edward were too big to fix. So Warwick allied himself with Edward's younger brother George, Duke of Clarence, instigating failed popular rebellions in 1469 and 1470, which caused them to flee to France. It was at this point that Louis XI brokered an unlikely alliance between Warwick and Margaret of Anjou, in which Warwick agreed to restore Margaret's imprisoned husband as king.

The complex history of the following months can be boiled down to the key events. Warwick,

backed by the French, invaded England in September 1470, though Margaret and her son remained in France until England had been secured.

Seeing his support collapse, Edward fled to the Low Countries, and Henry VI was restored as king. The Duke of Burgundy eventually backed Edward privately, giving him 50,000 florins and several Dutch ships. This allowed Edward to invade in spring 1471.

However, rather than facing one enemy, Edward IV faced two: Warwick and Anjou. After returning to England, he rallied enough troops and, on Easter Sunday, defeated an army led by Warwick at Barnet. Warwick was killed fleeing from the battle and his body put on display.

This should have ended the war, but Margaret, her son and many Lancastrians did not arrive in England until two days after the Kingmaker's death. Margaret's

reluctance to cross the channel with her supporters (no doubt to the annoyance of the French king) meant that opposition to Edward was divided, which gave him the advantage in both battles.

The Yorkists regrouped and gathered more troops, before marching west for a second battle at Tewkesbury. The battle occurred just south of Tewkesbury Abbey, where the Yorkist army was able to overwhelm the Lancastrians led by Margaret of Anjou, whose 16-year-old son was killed in the fighting.

The twists and turns that led to Battle of Tewkesbury are more than just a good story. They tell us a lot about how English and European politics were intricately bound together, even during periods of civil war.

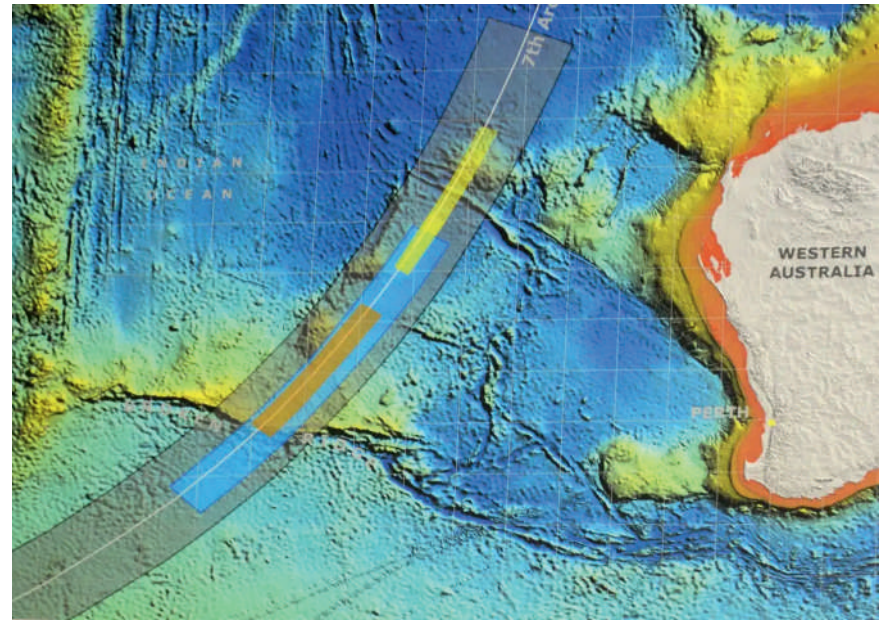
Both sides relied on foreign aid. France and the Low Countries were places of refuge when the tide was turning against them, and the French were important backers. In all, this period in one of England's most famous wars shows that civil wars, even in the middle ages, could be subject to foreign interference and the machinations of wider geopolitical events.

Ultimately, the Wars of the Roses were not an exclusively English set of events.

"In 1464, Edward secretly married Elizabeth Woodville, the widow of a knight killed fighting for the Lancastrians three years earlier. This was a scandalous marriage. Kings married to form wider alliances that would benefit the kingdom, never for love. The ceremony also occurred as Warwick was negotiating a union with a French princess, causing the earl much embarrassment"

Gordon McKelvie is a Senior Lecturer in History, University of Winchester

The ocean has a secret – and it may never reveal the whereabouts of flight MH370



Jamie Pringle, Alastair Ruffell and Ruth Morgan

It has been ten years since Malaysian airlines flight MH370, carrying 239 passengers and crew on board, disappeared less than one hour after taking off from Kuala Lumpur on 8th March 2014.

It has become one of the great unsolved mysteries of modern times and is a puzzle that has remained resolutely unsolved.

Theories abound on the flight's disappearance and current location of the wreckage. Unusually, all communications aboard the plane were switched off shortly after take-off. At that point, while over the South China Sea, the aircraft's course took on an inexplicable nature. It made a near 180 degree turn, taking a new course that crossed over the Malaysian-Thailand border before flying up the Malacca Straits to the top of Sumatra, where it turned roughly south to fly on a course that

appeared to take it deep into the Southern Indian Ocean.

We know this from intermittent satellite location information; this gave searchers a rough course of due south to a remote and deep ocean area of the Southern Indian Ocean before contact was lost.

When actively searching for MH370, sophisticated international surveillance aircraft initially conducted over 300 flights to visually look for plane debris on the surface. Then surface and submersible vehicles conducted further surveys, searching over 120,000 sq km of ocean before ending the search in 2017.

The effort to find MH370 became one of the most expensive aviation searches in history. These surveys used both sonar (active acoustic instruments to image the sea floor to locate the aircraft), and also listening devices to pick up the aircraft's flight data recorder.

Confirmed MH370 plane debris were found on Reunion Island in

July 2015, and off the coast of Mozambique in February 2016, which was consistent with what we know about ocean currents. In 2018, OceanInfinity, a private exploration company, also searched 25,000 sq km but without success.

Since then, a mixture of highly trained experts and members of the public some amateur, some highly professional – have sought to assist the search. These efforts have varied from simple to really advanced data analysis. They have attempted to map the locations and timings of plane debris, and other maritime debris, as well as model drift currents. In doing so, they are attempting to reconstruct where these may have originated from, which is no small task.

Analysis of the MH370 flight path has been pieced together from two different types of radar – primary and secondary – as well as the intermittent data 'pings' from the plane to the Inmarsat satellite. The results suggest that it diverted

south from its intended flight path.

Another technique called weak signal propagation (WSPR data – a way of using radio emission to track objects such as planes), had defined a specific but very large search area, some of which has already been searched.

Available hydroacoustic data (based on the way sound propagates in water) of the sea floor has also been analysed. However, only a relatively small area was covered and the marine sea floor in this region can be very rugged. There are deep submarine canyons that can hide objects much bigger than a plane.

Lessons from studying past flight disasters also informed the search. These included the 2009 Yemania plane crash in the Indian Ocean.

Recovery operation

For inland or coastal water searches, a phased investigation strategy is suggested as best practice, where investigators look to identify water depths, major current strengths and directions, together with pre-existing site information, before specialist search teams are employed using methods, equipment configurations and personnel that have all been accredited.

However this reliance on technology can be problematic. Even in small waterways, the presence of vegetation in the search area or a target buried by sediment can make these searches difficult.

Much of the Southern Indian Ocean sea floor is rugged and relatively unmapped, with water depths of up to 7.4km. It's away from regular shipping lanes and commercial flight patterns, with few fishing boats, no significant land masses and some of the worst winds and weather in the world. These factors also make it a very

A map showing the rough area of seafloor searched in the hunt for MH370. The area is very remote, with few ships, terrible weather, violent waves and very deep waters: as much as seven kilometres deep

Image: ALAN PORRITT / EPA IMAGES

challenging area to search.

In deep water (defined as anything more than 2km to 3km) deploying sonar is cumbersome and prohibitively expensive. It also takes a long time to generate data. A major challenge for scanning technologies is achieving accuracy at these kinds of depths due to the scattering of the signal caused by uneven, especially rocky, substrates on the sea floor.

The development of more advanced autonomous submersible vehicles may hold the key to finding MH370 in the Southern Indian Ocean, along with post-processing of raw data which can clarify what can be attributed to rocks as well as sea-floor hummocks and pockets.

This can distinguish between the sea floor and the objects being searched for. However, the area where MH370 disappeared is vast, meaning future searches will remain just as challenging as when the plane first went missing in 2014.

Jamie Pringle, Reader in Forensic Geoscience, Keele University

Alastair Ruffell Reader, School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast

Ruth Morgan Vice Dean Engineering (Interdisciplinarity Entrepreneurship), Professor of Crime and Forensic Science, UCL



A flaperon from MH370 washed up on Reunion island in the Indian Ocean. EPA IMAGES

Sport shows what it means to be Irish

SPORT

Dr Colm Hickey

Were you surprised that England beat Ireland at Twickenham last Saturday? If you were, you are probably not Irish.

Any Irishman or woman with even a smidgen of knowledge of our history would have known that an English victory, if not a certainty, was extremely likely, and would be part of the litany of Ireland's almost unflinching ability to snatch defeat from the very jaws of victory.

This is nothing new. It is a part of our Irish identity, in our historical and sporting DNA. Let me explain.

Let me take you back to 23rd April, which was a glorious sunny day. The Irish were ready and men from the four proud provinces were prepared to do battle. They had absolute faith in their leader as, almost for the first time, he had forged a team that was disciplined, united, and focused. Unusually, the odds were on their side. Although the opposition was strong and had defeated them many times before, today was different and while the Irish were wary of an all too often dominant and successful enemy, they knew that, if they executed their plan, they would surely win.

And on that day, they did. The enemy was smashed and left the field as a demoralised rabble. The leader of the Irish was overcome with emotion and knelt down in the greatest moment of Irish history that was sure to lead them to better things, but in his hour of triumph he died, killed by a retreating opponent.

At this moment Irish history turned, for this was no rugby match, but the battle of Clontarf in 1014 against the Viking invaders. The man killed was Brian Boru, the high King of Ireland, the only man to unite the fractious petty little kingdoms in Ireland to accept one ruler. Once he fell there was no one to replace him and Ireland fell backward: defeat snatched from the very jaws of victory.

You might think I am wrong, but assuredly I am not. Again and again in Irish history, when a rebellion against the English seemed assured, almost certain, some event would make the whole escapade end in defeat, disappointment, and demoralisation.

Fast forward to Elizabethan times when the Irish rose against the English. Time and again they had the English on the ropes, but time and again they failed to land the knock-out blow. In 1588, and again in 1603, the English were there for the taking but a mixture of poor weather, communication and strategy meant that they failed to press home their advantage.

In 1602, a long promised Spanish



force finally arrived in the form of 3,500 soldiers at Kinsale, Cork, although a larger fleet had turned away because of bad weather. Even so, the English were no match for some rampant Irish forces who had defeated other English armies, but cometh the battle, not cometh the man. The English under Mountjoy immediately besieged Kinsale with 7,000 men but two great Irish Chieftains, O'Neill, O'Donnell, marched their armies south to engage Mountjoy, whose men were starving and wracked by disease. The English force should have been destroyed but, O'Donnell, against the wishes and advice of O'Neill, took the decision to attack. Forming up for a surprise attack, the Irish chiefs were themselves surprised by a cavalry charge, resulting in a rout of the Irish forces. The Spanish in Kinsale surrendered after their allies' defeat. Personal rivalry between the two Irish commanders meant they failed to act in unison and allowed a smaller, more disciplined force to defeat them with the Spanish going home with their tails very much between their legs; defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

The Irish kept trying and, in 1798, Wolfe Tone led the United Irishmen in another rebellion against the English. This time

everything was on his side as Napoleon Bonapart had authorised a French invading Armada to spur the Irish into open revolt and drive the English out of Ireland. Guess what? It failed. Tone had travelled to Paris where he sought to convince the French that Ireland was the key to defeating England and in June, General Lazare Hoche commanded an expedition of 15,000 troops. It arrived off Ireland at Bantry Bay on 22nd December 1796, but unremitting storms prevented a landing. Tone remarked that 'England had its luckiest escape since the Armada.' Tone was captured, but committed suicide before he could be executed: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

Robert Emmett's rebellion of 1803 was a fiasco, as was the one in 1848, better known as the battle of Widow McCormack's cabbage patch. The Fenians Uprising of 1867 was foiled by government spies. Even the Rising of 1916 was beset by confusion and division, with German guns failing to land and orders countermanded by the leaders. The Germans sent a ship, the *Aud*, loaded with weapons to the coast of Kerry on Good Friday, 21st April 1916. This was earlier than the rebels expected and so no one was there to meet it.

Meanwhile, the Royal Navy knew about the arms shipment and intercepted the *Aud*, prompting the captain to scuttle the ship. When Eoin MacNeill, one of the leaders of the Rising, learned that the arms shipment had been lost, he issued a countermand to all Volunteers, cancelling all actions for Sunday. But this was ignored by Padric Pearse who stormed the GPO with only about 250 men and began a militarily futile rising in Dublin.

Time and again, when the opportunity arose, a combination of bad planning, or weather, or tactics, or teamwork meant that probable victory ended in heroic defeat: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory. Sound familiar?

So, what of sport? How can it be that, when greatness beckons, all too often Irish teams find a way of shooting themselves in the foot? Take the 2023 Rugby World Cup when Ireland, arguably, the best team in the world having defeated South Africa, who went on to win the tournament, agonisingly failed to defeat an admittedly excellent All Black side, despite crossing the line three times without being able to ground the ball for the decisive try: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

What about in 1966 when Ireland had to play Spain in a FIFA

World Cup play off? In the build up to the match Spanish and French newspapers reported that Ireland had agreed to Paris as a play-off venue in exchange for Spain's share of the gate receipts. The total gate receipts for the play-off were £25,000 – almost three times the annual FAI income at the time. The FAI had chosen a guaranteed amount rather than the potential of far higher revenue had Ireland qualified for the 1966 World Cup finals. This displayed a distinct lack of ambition and a lack of belief in the ability of the Irish team. When Ireland's best player on the night, Theo Foley, was off getting treated for an injury, the player he was marking scored the decisive goal: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

What about the 2002 World Cup, considered by many to be a tournament of low quality? Ireland, with one of the world's best players, Roy Keane, could have gone far in the competition, but in a spat about training facilities, the quality of practice balls and the 'Englishness' of manager Mick McCarthy, he left the squad and diminished the team: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

And so, on Saturday, as Ireland, perhaps the best team in the world on current form, played a hitherto misfiring England, it found itself two points ahead with seconds to go. 'Do not concede', we all thought (and some prayed) but Ireland did, as a last gasp dropped goal gave England a surprising win. The devastated Irish players sank to their knees, the joyous English players hugged each other and hollered with delight.

Ireland with the chance to win consecutive back-to-back grand slams had failed: defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

In the pub where I was watching the match, my English friends were stunned by what they saw. They were astonished. I was not. I am Irish. I know all about disappointment in history in sport. It is in our Irish DNA. So I wandered home with the same slow walk of the defeated, demoralised, and disappointed warriors of ancient Irish history. When I got there, I took down my flag and changed out of my replica 2023 Rugby World Cup shirt.

Yet, as I did so I thought: 'Hang on, wait a minute, this weekend is St Patrick's.' So, I will put on the green, wear a shamrock and watch Ireland play Scotland. Is that not what sport is all about? Does that not explain the invisible thread between sport and identity? Does that not allow us to show the world what a proud, gregarious, funny, warm-hearted, friendly people we Irish are?

And that is a fixture that we can never, and we will never, lose. Happy St Patrick's Day!

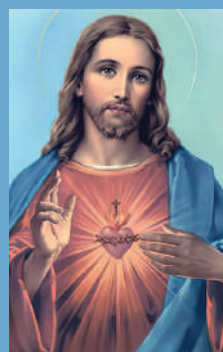


PRAYERS /THANKSGIVING

POWERFUL NOVENA

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be praised, adored, glorified and loved, today and every day, throughout the whole world, now and forever. Amen.
Say 6 times a day for 9 days.

IMAJ



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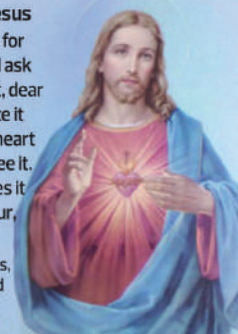


With Grateful Thanks to Our Lady, St Joseph and St Michael.

(CD)

PRAYERS/THANKSGIVING

Oh, Sacred Heart of Jesus In the past I have asked for many favours, this time I ask for this special one. Take it, dear Heart of Jesus, and place it within your own broken heart where your Father will see it. Then, in His merciful eyes it will become your favour, not mine. Amen.
Say prayer for three days, promise publication and favour will be granted. Never known to fail



THE MIRACULOUS PRAYER

Dear Heart of Jesus. In the past I have asked for many favours, this time I ask you for a very special one. (mention favour). Take it dear Heart of Jesus, and place it within your own broken heart where your Father sees it. Then in his merciful eyes it will become your favour not mine, Amen
Say prayer for three days.



PRAYERS /THANKSGIVING

Grateful thanks to St Jude for favours granted

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LITURGICAL CALENDARS

Ordinary Form

Sunday Year B, Weekday Cycle II
Sunday, March 17: 5th Sunday of Lent, Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 51:3-4, 12-15 r. 12; Heb. 5:7-9; Jn. 12:20-33

Monday, March 18: St Cyril of Jerusalem, Bishop, Doctor of the Church, Dan.13:1-9,15-17,19-30,33-62; Ps.23; Jn. 8:1-11

Tuesday, March 19: St Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2 Sam. 7:4-5, 12-14, 16; Ps. 89:2-5,27,29 r. 37; Rom. 4:13, 16-18, 22; Mt. 1:16, 18-21, 24

Wednesday, March 20: Dan.3:14-20,24-25,28; Dan.3:52-56; Jn.8:31-42

Thursday, March 21: Gen.17:3-9; Ps.105:4-9; Jn.8:51-59

Friday, March 22: Jer.20:10-13; Ps.18:2-7; Jn.10:31-42

Saturday, March 23: St Turibius de Mogrovejo, Bishop Ezek.37:21-28; Jer.31:10-13; Jn.11:45-56

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